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SERMONS
ON THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE



SERMONS ON THE
BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

SELECTED FROM THE VOLUME OF
VILLAGE SERMONS

BY THE LATE
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UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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PREFATORY NOTE

THIS series of addresses, which appeared in a volume of *Village Sermons* published in 1897, is reprinted in deference chiefly to a request from the Principal of St. Stephen's College, Delhi, who writes that he finds these sermons extremely valuable for Indian students, whereas it is difficult to discover a text-book which supplies just this kind of instruction. "There is something," he adds, "eminently suitable in Dr. Hört's 'yet speaking' in this way to those in whom during his life he took so deep and discriminating an interest." It is hoped that in this form the sermons may also prove more widely useful at home.

A. F. HORT.

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SERMONS
ON THE BOOK , OF THE BIBLE

I

THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

"God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son."--*Hebrews* i. 1, 2.

I PROPOSE to begin to-day a course of sermons on the Bible. In speaking to you from Sunday to Sunday on the lessons contained in separate texts, as I have hitherto done almost without exception, I have often felt doubtful how much I might take for granted as already known to the greater number of the congregation. Every one here, I trust, knows some little about the Bible; every one has read, or has heard, some parts of it, and has carried away some impression from what he has read or heard. Some few, of course, are well acquainted with most of what the Bible contains. I imagine that all except a few are tolerably familiar with the sound of those chapters which are read in church, and some other chapters; that they have carried away with them, and hold more or less clearly in their memories,

a few of the most striking stories and the clearest and most forcible sayings; but that they could not often tell the place in the Bible of what they do remember, or explain how one thing follows after another, and that of the greater part of the Bible they have no knowledge at all.

I am not saying this by way of blame; I am only trying to put into words what seems to be the plain fact. There is of course some blame attaching to all wants of this kind. If we cared for the Bible more, we should read it more, and take more pains to understand it and remember it. Still there is much excuse for a great deal of ignorance. Of course those who have been at school have gone through some of the most important books of the Bible in a regular and careful way. But unfortunately we have not time at school to do as much as we could wish, or to do anything as well as we could wish. And after school-time it is only too easy to forget what we have learned, if we do not keep it up by constant reading for ourselves, and trying to make sure of the meaning of what we read.

What I wish now to do is to help you to understand in a general way what there is in the Bible, to explain to you the contents and the use of its different parts and books, to point out how one joins on to another, how we learn from one what we do not and cannot learn from another. In this way dim and hazy impressions may be changed into clear and well-ordered knowledge, and the new interest in the Bible which I trust some of you will gain may lead you to read it for yourselves more eagerly and care-

fully in future. Speaking about large parts of the Bible at once, I shall not often have time of opportunity to dwell on single texts; but this is much more an advantage than a loss. Such sermons as those to which we are most accustomed, sermons examining and explaining a single text, are at all times useful and perhaps necessary. There is no better way of bringing before a regular congregation those great truths on which the whole Christian life is founded. But sermons on single texts have one great disadvantage: they help to keep up that mischievous notion which is everywhere so common, that the Bible is nothing but a collection of texts, into which we may put our hand and draw out at random whatever we please without troubling ourselves to think where it came from. Few texts, perhaps none, can ever be quite understood while they are taken alone, cut away from the place in the Bible in which they stand. And many of the most precious truths of the Bible are not to be found in any text at all; they come into our minds only when we think of whole chapters and books together.

A more serious objection to keeping to this one subject for a long time together is that it takes us away in some degree from the ever-pressing needs of our own wants, and our own duties. It is in great measure concerned with what is sometimes called head-knowledge. It is quite possible for us to know a great deal about the Bible, to be able to answer questions about its books, and what there is in them, to be able to tell its stories, and even to explain the meaning of its sayings, and yet have no true sense of

its divine power, to remain untouched by the voice of the Holy Spirit within it speaking to our spirit, to forget altogether that it has been given us after all to teach us God's will concerning us, and to help us to draw nigh to Him. I feel this most strongly, and am anxious that you should now and always feel it too. Yet I do not believe that it is unprofitable for virtue and godly living and the love of Christ to have our thoughts led in church to such views about the Bible as require little more than dry understanding. Knowledge is not religion; yet assuredly want of knowledge very often leads to want of religion. If we were more interested in the Bible we should love it more, and drink in more of its blessed spirit, and without knowledge it is impossible to have more than a narrow and soon exhausted interest.

Knowledge then, a knowledge of the mere contents of the Bible, is really a step towards increase of religion; it clears away many of the hindrances which keep us from hearing what God speaks to us, it makes us feel at home with the Bible, and that is the beginning of learning to use it as our guide in the daily thoughts and the daily actions of life.

There is no congregation in the whole Church which needs nothing but warning and exhorting; all need teaching likewise. It is not enough to be told what we should feel, and think, and say, and do. We want to have the story of God's wondrous dealings with men in past time impressed on our minds; and many of us will never be able to understand it unless it is explained to them. We want to have the

great unchanging truths about God and man and the world in which He has set man grasped firmly and made a part of our constant belief; and that we can never do without help from others. God's kingdom is indeed, blessed be His name, ever open to the ignorant and the dull: it is the pure in heart who shall see God. Yet in respect to the Bible especially, it remains true that whatever helps our understanding helps also in the long run our praying and our working.

I hope to be able to carry on this course of sermons with tolerable regularity. It may now and then be interrupted, either by special days of the Christian year, or by various accidental reasons. I trust however that on the whole I may be able to go on from week to week, so that what is said on one Sunday may not be forgotten before the next time. For the same reason I shall not at present attempt to give a Sunday to each book. There are so many books in the Bible that I could hardly expect to carry your memories on with me throughout; and I am especially desirous that you should at the end remember the beginning, that you should be able to take in the whole together, and to have the different parts of the Bible before your minds at once, just as we can see the different parts of a picture all at once.

Let me suggest also that you will find it a great help to take your own Bibles when you go home, and look over the part that you have been hearing about in church, trying whether you cannot read for yourselves there some of the things which you have heard mentioned from this place. Indeed, you will find

enough to employ you if you have time to carry on the subject during the week, and in this way you will fix it more firmly into your minds, and be better prepared to understand what you hear the next time.

It will be enough to-day to speak of the Bible altogether, and to point out quite shortly the two great parts of which it consists. I do not propose to dwell at any length on the character and value of the Bible. Little is gained by using high-flown language about it. It is a book literally at praise: there is a kind of impertinence in praising it. The best praise we can render it is to use it; to read, and practise, and read again. It was written for our learning: let us take care that it finds us teachable, willing to learn, possessed with a deep feeling of needing its help. And how is it that it is able to give us such help? For two reasons: because it is, above all other books, the book of man, and because it is the book of God. It is the book of man, not only because it was written by men, but because it is full of the deepest thoughts, longings, desires, struggles, victories of men, their best work done on the earth, their most passionate cries to the heaven above. It is the book of God, because in it we hear what He spoke to other ages, and through every part of it He speaks to us now, telling us what He has done for men in the days of old, what He has done for all mankind in all times, what He is doing for us now; pointing out the way to Himself, encouraging us to enter on that way, warning us of the dangers which beset us by the way, giving us gleams of light from above to cheer us and guide us on the way.

This is all that I think it necessary to say at present about the Bible as one single book. At a later time we may perhaps return to this subject with greater advantage. Let us now think of the Bible not as one, but as many books. This is an important fact about it which is too often forgotten. The latest part of it is very old—nearly eighteen hundred years old—but the oldest part of it is far older than that, going back into distant times, when it is impossible to talk of years with any certainty. And from the time of the oldest books to the newest the other books made their appearance one after the other without much pause. Some were written just as they stand: others evidently had small beginnings, and have grown up by slow degrees to their present form. Some were written by great men, whose names are familiar to us for other reasons; others we have received without any sure knowledge of who it was that wrote them. Kings, priests, prophets, shepherds, fishermen, tentmakers—these and other classes of men had their share in building up our Bible. Some of the books had their first beginnings in wild and barbarous times, others in settled times of law and order. Some were written in bright prosperity, others in the midst of terrors and distresses from warfare with powerful enemies, others from the depths of captivity itself. One thing alone all the authors had in common: they all alike belonged to one people—they were all Jews, worshippers of the one God of Israel.

The first great division which meets us in the Bible is that of the Old and New Testaments. You

all know these names, but I do not think their meaning is well understood. People often speak of the Testament as if there were but one, when they mean the New Testament. But the Old Testament is as much a part of the Bible: and we should go strangely astray, if we were to take all our notions of God's works and ways from the New Testament. 'Testament' means the same thing as 'covenant.' Neither word is very easy to explain shortly. I think you will see its meaning best by regarding it as the kind of *understanding* which God has with men, the footing on which He deals with them at one time or another. God Himself does not change, but men are always changing; and God's ways of dealing with them cannot therefore always be the same. A father is on different terms with his son, according as he is still a child or has grown up to manhood. Supposing the father to be wise and loving, and the son to be dutiful and loving too, still when childhood has passed there will be a change in the outward form and the inward spirit of the understanding between them; there will usually be less of actual commanding and obeying, more of sympathy and mutual helpfulness.

Now the Jewish people went through a change like that. God promised by the mouth of Jeremiah (xxx. 31 ff.) that in due time He would make a new covenant, a new testament, with the house of Israel, writing His law no longer on tables of stone, but in their hearts and inward parts; and that promise was fulfilled when Christ came. Properly therefore the Old Testament means God's manner

of dealing with His people in the old time before Christ came, and the New Testament His new manner of dealing with His people after Christ came. And then the books take their names from the state of things described there. • We call the earlier books for shortness the Old Testament, because they tell us about God's ways under His Old Testament or Covenant. We call the later books for shortness the New Testament, because they set forth the nature of God's New Testament or Covenant, which began for mankind with the death and resurrection of His Blessed Son.

This leads us to the great difference between the books of the Old and New Testaments, as declared in the text. I have before preached on those words from the beginning of the Epistle to the Hebrews as a Christmas text: to-day they will help us to see the likeness and the unlikeness of the two great divisions of the Bible. "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." First, Old and New Testaments have this one thing in common—God speaks in both. He spoke to the men of old time. He spoke to the men of the apostles' generation. What He taught both the one and the other is written down in the two parts of the Bible, and through that writing He still speaks to us.

So much for the sameness; now for the differences. Under the old covenant He spoke to the fathers, the forefathers of the apostles—yes, and the spiritual forefathers of us, for we too are the children of

Moses and David and Isaiah, drawing our life from them and their work. But He could not speak to them all at once, for they lived at different times; many hundreds of years divided them. He could not speak to them all alike, for they were in different stages of growth and knowledge, and what would suit one would not suit another. So He spoke to them at sundry times and in divers manners, here a little and there a little, making the different and partial and broken declarations of His name and His will combine together into one whole, bestowing thus on the later generations a richer and fuller knowledge than any of their forefathers had enjoyed. Lastly, all this speech of His under the Old Testament was through prophets, men liable to fall into weakness and sin, each declaring some part of God's message, but only a part, each bearing his witness chiefly by words, each at best a trusty messenger, but nothing more.

But in those last days a new order of things had come in. No longer in broken and scattered words from the stammering lips of men, no longer by a line of various messengers; but in one perfect life full of glorious words and full of deeds which had a yet more powerful voice than words, God had spoken once for all, and that life was the life of His only begotten Son, the exact likeness of His own nature, so far as it could be expressed in human character. This then is the substance of the New Testament—God speaking in His Son. The words apply in the simplest and truest sense to the Gospels, but as we shall see presently they may take in likewise what-

ever is contained in all our books of the New Testament, Acts and Epistles and Revelation as well. The Old Testament brings before us the hope of man, the promise of God ; the New makes known the glory and rest of man, the fulfilment of God.

Next time I hope to speak of the Old Testament more particularly, especially of its first five books. I trust we shall be able to see how little we can afford to do without those records of an early time, even now that we are living in the sunshine of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He came not to destroy, He Himself tells us, but to fulfil. Looking back into the dim early world in which the faith in the one true God began, we are enabled to read its story not only with heightened interest, but with greatly increased profit, now that we can turn upon it the light which comes from the Perfect Son in whom the Father was well pleased. And again, the form of the Son Himself rises in far greater clearness and glory before our eyes when we have learned to know and love His many forerunners from Abraham onwards, and so been duly prepared to welcome at last the full message of the kingdom of heaven.

THE OLD TESTAMENT A HISTORY OF THE JEWS

"IN Jewry is God known: His name is great in Israel."--*Psalms* lxxv. 1.

A FORTNIGHT ago we began to consider the Bible and its different parts. We saw that first and foremost it is divided into two great well-known parts, the Old and New Testaments, neither of which ought to be read and cherished without the other. The name Testament, we saw, which is the same as Covenant, means here properly the kind of understanding between God and His people, the particular footing on which He treats them. In old times they were like children, they needed a different sort of treatment from what they need in later days, and so they were under the Old Covenant or Testament, and the book called the Old Testament is the account of what God spoke to them in one way or another under that Old Covenant. But when Christ came another state of things began. God's people had grown ripe

for a new and more advanced teaching. He took them into a New Covenant or Testament. His dealings with them were on a new footing; and the book called the New Testament is the account of what God has spoken to them in one way or another under that New Covenant.

Still the old is not meant to be driven out by the coming in of the new. When we pass from childhood to manhood, we are still the same creatures in body and mind, though much be changed and much added. We do not begin all over again. We carry with us to our grave that which has been formed within us in our early years. The teaching we have received as children does not all at once lose its value. Some of it having been learned once for all does not need to be repeated, but still we should fare badly if it were lost out of our minds. Some of it again has till now been obliged to be put in such shapes as a young head and heart can receive: when we grow up, we can take it in more truly and more completely in another shape; but still we shall do well not to forget either, if we wish to have a hold on the perfect truth. Lastly, even the best and ripest among us are always liable to fits of what we must consider as childishness, slipping back into a wild and ungoverned state which they ought to have outgrown, and for them assuredly the rougher and more childish kind of teaching has not lost its use.

Even so is it with the Old and New Testaments. There are many things in the Old Testament which belong to the old state of things, and cannot without mischief be applied to us now exactly as they stand.

There is an undying lesson in them, but it requires to be well-considered and explained before it can be applied. Yet, for all that, the value of the Old Testament for us is not worn out and cannot wear out. Though we are living in a late age of the world, many of us are still so unripe in heart and mind that the lessons of those early days have a special fitness for us. For all of us the Old Testament is a useful way of entrance into the New Testament. We never can understand the New Testament while we are ignorant of the Old Testament. It supplies as it were the alphabet, the letters, the simple thoughts, in which the higher and deeper lessons of the New Testament are written. Nay more, there is much about our life here on earth as God would have it be which is taught plainly in the Old Testament, and which is either not taught at all or taught very slightly in the New Testament. Any one who tries to carve out for himself a religion out of the New Testament will assuredly make something extremely unlike the true complete Christian faith. He cannot throw away half his Bible without throwing away half of what should be his belief too.

I said to you before that all the books of the Bible, Old and New Testament alike, have one thing in common: they were all written by Jews, worshippers of the one God of Israel. Unless you get this fact clearly into your minds, you never can properly understand the Bible, least of all the Old Testament. You may be able to snatch at single stories and sayings here and there, but you will lose the thread of the chapters which you hear or read,

and in losing the thread lose at the same time most of the meaning. No doubt there is something wearisome and uninteresting in hearing much said in a sermon about a people so little familiar to us as the Jews. They seem such a long way off from us and our concerns. We naturally wish to hear about something nearer home, something which comes within the borders of our own everyday thoughts and doings. I know, brethren, this is so, and must be so, and thus there is a great temptation to let the Jews alone, and try to say nothing about old times. But then I know also that by so doing I should be leaving the greater part of the Bible a closed book to you. My opportunities of speaking to you are short and few, while you have your Bibles always with you. At any time you please you have only to open them, and find yourselves in the presence of a teaching infinitely wiser and more heavenly than that of any living man. You have also the promise of the Holy Spirit to enkindle you and enlighten you as you read. But still there does remain a veil over the Bible, so long as the people to whom and for whom it was first written are to us no more than strangers and foreigners, and I believe I can do you no greater service by way of bringing you face to face with the Bible, than in trying to take away that strangeness, and helping you to think about the Jews as friends of your own, about whom you are always glad to hear.

Every time that I speak to you about the Bible, I shall be obliged also to speak about the Jews. In trying to describe and explain the different parts of

the Bible I shall be going through the different stages in the life of the Jews. So far therefore teaching about the Jews cannot come altogether in one sermon, but must be spread over all. Not till the course is ended shall we be in a position to obtain a full and clear view of their wonderful career. Yet now at starting some little explanation is required, that there may be no mistakes hereafter, and to make sure that we are not going on too fast, I shall begin with very simple and easy matters.

We call the Jews a people. What does that mean? It generally means a number of persons bound together by three things: by having one blood, one language, one land. Other bonds often, nay usually, come in, such as one set of customs, one law, one government, one religion. But the three I have mentioned are the most constant.

First, one blood. Perhaps nothing binds men so closely to each other as the knowledge or belief that they are all of one race, as we call it, all sprung originally from the same parents. The feeling of being all more or less of kin, all connected by a sort of cousinhood, is in fact a true, though it may be a weaker, feeling of brotherhood. In late times the purity of the race gets often broken in upon by intermarriage with foreigners, yet still the new comers are thought of as adopted into the great old family: the family feeling is strong enough to embrace them without losing its own power. The Jews mixed wonderfully little with other people till quite late in their history, and the family feeling was part of their religion. One of the names by which they are called is 'the children of

Israel.' Generation after generation was thus taught to look back to the first beginnings of the people. Each new life moved further and further away from the days of Israel or Jacob, yet still it was their delight to remember that Israel was the first father of them all. Divine strength to do and to endure came upon them whenever they cherished that thought. It lifted them out of base and earthly things. It carried them half-way to God. For God Himself was likewise known to them in the same form. Declaring Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He brought Himself near to them through the irrecollections of their forefathers. And again, He strengthened their attachment to each other, their dutiful reverence for those who had gone before, their care for their children and their children's children by this name, which reminded them that the one same unseen King and Friend, never dying, never forgetting, was watching over one and all.

Secondly, a people is held together by speaking one language. Most of you know, I suppose, that almost every country has its own set of words, and that the words used in one country are quite different from those used in another to express the same thing. Generally all the persons in one country grow up able to understand what is said by other persons in the same country, and to make themselves understood by them; but if a man leaves his own country and goes to another, he finds everyone using a totally different set of sounds when they speak, and he cannot understand them or make himself understood unless he has taken the pains to learn

their way of speaking as well as his own. These different ways of speaking are called languages; and, as I said, one of the things which most holds a people together, which makes them in fact to be a people, is speaking the same language. When they are young children, they learn it little by little from hearing it all round them, even if they are not purposely taught; it grows up with them as part of themselves, a part which they cannot possibly lose so long as they are among their own people. They seldom or never think about it, but they are for ever using it as naturally as they put out their hand to take what they want. If now they come across men of another people, speaking another language, this difference of speech makes at once a deep gap between them. Even if they after a time get over the difficulty of understanding and being understood, they seem to themselves to have fallen in with creatures of another world, and they go back to their own people with an increased feeling of belonging to them and of having far more in common with them than with any others.

This bond of language the Jews possessed. One or two other neighbouring nations may perhaps have spoken languages not very unlike theirs. But their own language, as time went on, acted more and more powerfully in making them a people. Almost from the first it became intermixed with their thoughts about God. First the memory of His commandments as written on the tables of stone or spoken by the lips of Moses, then the possession of holy books, the short beginnings of a Bible, led them to feel that

their common speech was not merely the necessary means of conversing with each other on the things of everyday life, but also supplied the outward form in which God spoke to their fathers and to them. Thus once more they were brought near to God through one of the things which kept them near each other, and again the more they thought of Him and the message of His will, the more they were reminded how they belonged to one people.

Again, men are made one people by dwelling in one land. We in England ought to understand this better than any people that ever lived, for nothing has been so helpful in making us of one heart and mind as the position of our country, smaller than most of the countries and shut off from the rest of the world by the sea all around it. Every tie that makes up neighbourhood has its part in fashioning into a people those who dwell in the same land. They are always nearer to each other than to foreigners, and how much does not that carry along with it? If a foreign enemy comes against the land, they all alike suffer from his violence: if he is to be resisted or driven back, they must all make common cause and join together against him, each making sacrifices for the good of all. In each there naturally grows up an attachment to the soil on which he has been born and bred. It gives him a feeling of fixedness and lastingness in a world where so much is ever changing. The land has been present at all the acts of his life; he has played upon it in childhood, worked upon it in manhood. And what it is to him, that it is also to his

neighbours, his countrymen. He cannot think of it as something which belongs merely to himself, he is too small a creature for that, he and all like him. The land which all alike tread bears the clearest evidence to the need which each has of all the rest. It is all one ample home where each knows that he has a right to find his proper place as a child of the one family; a common ground in which every other power of union is able to root itself.

And such was Judea, or Jewry, the land of Israel, to the Jews, the children of Israel. It too was a little land, partly divided from the lands of other peoples by the sea on one side and barren wildernesses on two other sides. The affection which they bore it was one of the most powerful ties which helped them to feel that they were indeed one at times when other causes were tearing them asunder. God saw fit that for their sins they should be carried away prisoners into a strange land, and there they seemed ready to be scattered away and leave no trace on the face of the earth, till in due time part of them obtained leave to return to their own country, and then once more the people rose out of the dust. And again, as in the memory of their common forefathers, as in the language which father handed down to son, so in this case also we cannot understand the religion of the Jews - that same religion which is the foundation of our own, and to this very day part of our own, if we leave out of mind their land, and all of which their land spoke to them. It was, as we shall hear presently, the Land of Promise. They believed that God had promised it to their

first father Abraham more than four hundred years before they were allowed to claim it as their own. Their entrance into it was marked by wonderful signs of God's presence and favour, and He taught them to look on continuance upon its sacred soil as the highest earthly blessing, the best reward for those who obeyed His laws. No wonder that it became to them a kind of heaven upon earth, a place which seemed full of God, so that banishment from its holy places had something of the bitterness of banishment from Him. No wonder that the land which He had glorified with such marks of His love made precious every rightful dweller upon it, and was felt by all true Israelites to call on them in His Name to rejoice together and suffer together.

We have now considered, brethren, the three chief signs which mark a people in the proper sense of the word, and which the Bible shows to have marked the ancient people of God, the Jews. They were all descended from Abraham and his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob or Israel. They all spoke the same language, the language of the Old Testament. They all dwelt in the same land. So far they were in great measure like other peoples, old and new. The difference was that God made Himself known to no other people. That is what renders their history a treasure of the highest and best instruction to us; not a mere subject of curiosity for those who have time and opportunity to busy themselves about things that happened so very long ago, but a possession meant for the use of every one of us. What makes the Bible, as I said before, the book of

God is that in it He is speaking to man, speaking first and last of Himself, but also in a lesser degree of all things which lead to Him. But He speaks to us by acts as well as by words. The Bible is the history of acts of His, as well as a collection of words of His. If we know what He has done, we know what He is. Now all the acts of His related in the Bible are one way or another concerned with the Jewish people, and all the writers in the Bible were themselves members of the Jewish people. The Old Testament is especially the history of the Jewish people up to within a few years of its last scattering, telling us as much of it as we need to know for the sake of understanding the plan of God's dealing with men. Next week we shall, I trust, be able to take the first few books, in which we read how the people first came into being.

Meanwhile let us take to ourselves the lesson which a true Israelite in the middle or later time of his nation's history drew from the acts of God which already lay before his sight. "The merciful and gracious Lord," he says, "hath so done his marvellous works that they ought to be had in remembrance. They stand fast for ever and ever, and are done in truth and equity. He sent redemption unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever; holy and reverend is his name. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do thereafter, the praise of it endureth for ever."

III

THE PENTATEUCH—GENESIS

"HEARKEN to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord : look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged. Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you : for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him."—*Isaiah* li. 1, 2.

LAST Sunday we considered the Jewish people, the children of Israel, because it was necessary to have some sort of clear notion about them if we wished to understand the greater part of the Bible. We saw that, whatever God spoke to the rest of mankind, He spoke through Jews and to Jews : that God's acts, by which He speaks even more than by words, His acts, that is, as told in the Bible, were acts in the history of the Jews. We cannot therefore know at all exactly what either His words or His acts really meant unless we know something about the Jews themselves. We saw that they formed a people, a set of men bound together by being of the same blood, by speaking the same language, and by dwelling in the same land. We saw how these

different ties which bound them to each other bound them also to God. As they were the children of Israel, that is, all having Jacob or Israel for their father, so He was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, known to them as the same Lord who had also been Lord of their family in all generations. The language which they spoke in all common business of life, and which made them closer to each other than any foreigners, was the language in which His Law was written on the tables of stone, and in which in the course of time holy books were written as a perpetual fixed message of His will. The land in which they dwelt together as neighbours, or rather as children of the same great family, in one wide home, was also the Land of Promise, given them by God more than four hundred years before they took possession of it, holy in itself, containing within it the holy place which was the outward sign of God's presence on the earth.

To-day we begin to examine the early books of the Old Testament itself. The first five books stand together by themselves. Sometimes they are called the Pentateuch, which means only "The book of five volumes." The Jews themselves used to call them "the Law," because the latter part contained the law of God given through Moses, by which the people was more or less governed in the later times. This name is full of meaning to us. God speaks to us men with different voices, and one of those voices is that of the Lawgiver. If our lives are to be right and happy, and every way blessed, we must begin by remembering that there are rules laid down for us to

follow, rules given us by One both higher and wiser than we are, to guide us in the temptations and perplexities of life, rules which we disobey at our peril. This is only a part of what we ought to think about God, but it is a part which it is never safe to forget: for so long as there is any evil in the world, and any inclination to follow evil, so long there must be obedience to a law, and so long we must never forget that God is the Maker of the Law. ✓

We shall have to return to this subject in due course presently. But first we must attend to the place which these five books hold in the history of the Jews. Speaking roughly, we may say that they tell us the *beginning* of the Jewish people, the early steps and stages by which they became a people. All through these five books one of the three great marks of a people which I mentioned last Sunday is wanting to them. They are of one blood. They speak one language, but they have no land of their own. For four hundred years they are captives and slaves in a foreign land; for forty years they are ever on the move, wandering on through the trackless wilderness. Just at the end we see that their journeyings are coming to an end: in the next book they enter the Promised Land and take possession of it. But that does not concern us to-day. In the books about which I am now speaking they are always on the way; on the way to a home of their own, on the way to become a full grown and complete people.

I said just now that this is a rough account of these five books. Speaking strictly, it is true only of

the last four out of the five. The first book, *Genesis*, tells of a still earlier state of things, the time before the four hundred years of the Israelites in Egypt began, the time when as yet there was living but one small family, from whom all that great multitude were to spring. The greater part of the book of *Genesis*, that is, the last thirty-nine chapters from the twelfth chapter onwards, is taken up with the patriarchs, as they are called, the earliest heads of the family, first Abram or Abraham, then his son Isaac, then *his* son Jacob or Israel, then *his* twelve sons, from whom came the twelve tribes of Israel.

This carries us back within a very few pages of the beginning of the Bible. In those few pages we find ourselves in the time before Abraham, yet earlier ages of mankind, and at last in the first and second chapters at the very beginning of the world. Here at the very outset we are shown what is to be the true subject of the Bible from its first page to its last; it is to be God speaking to us about Himself. Mark that well: He has something to tell us about the world in which He has placed us, much to tell us about ourselves and our fellow-men; but all that He **has** to tell us in the Bible about any of these things is for the sake of religion, for the sake of bringing Himself near to us and drawing us near to Himself.

This is a very important matter, on which we have great need to see our way clearly. The Bible is the best of books, but it cannot take the place of other books. It brings to us the highest, the most life-giving, the most entirely necessary knowledge. There are many things most useful for us to know,

still more which it is most interesting and delightful to know, which are certainly not to be found in the Bible. But it is a blunder to look for them there. If we try to do that, if we try to force the Bible to teach us what it was not meant to teach us, we are in great danger of missing its true lessons, and glorifying our own foolish fancies as if they came from God.

For the purposes of religion all beings that exist fall under three great heads: Man, nature or the outward world, and God. How they may be connected with each other, what part one may have in the others, is a secondary matter. The great thing is to see the distinctness of these three and the rightful place which the outward world and God hold towards man. This is taught with marvellous power in these opening chapters of Genesis. I do not in the least pretend to be able to understand all in these chapters. They are full of serious difficulties which will perhaps never be cleared up; at all events, no one has cleared them up as yet. But I do not think they do us any harm, if we read the chapters in a right spirit.

Let us just look quietly at some of the great truths which lie on the surface, truths by no means natural and easy to reach for those who have not been bred up in them, contradicting, in fact, many of the notions which in former ages, and in part even in our own, have been most widely spread among mankind.

We see at the beginning of all things God Himself, making all things. He is not the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is therein: He is distinct from them.

11: He made them all: He was before them all. He made them according to a plan and order. Each part of the world had its own work to do, its own place in His great scheme. Last of all came man. The world was older than man, it supplied the materials for man: man was a part of the world, and was meant to remember that. On the other hand, there was that in man which could be found nowhere else in the world. If his mere clay was kneaded of the dust of the earth, the pattern was a heavenly one. His truest likeness was to be found in God Himself. Though he was younger than the world, he was to be the first example of that which meets us so often in the Bible, and in our own life. The elder was to serve the younger. God gave man dominion over the older world, and all that it contained. It was not only to be beautiful and glorious for the delight of its Maker, it was to be useful for the service of man. But here came in a most necessary lesson. God pronounced the whole world good. In the course of time man in his pride would look down on the world. Nay worse, when he became evil himself, he would lay the blame on the world. He would pretend that the only thing which made him sin was his connexion with the earth, his own body, and all the things which had charms for his bodily senses. "No," said God, "that is not true, I made the world as truly as I made you; I made it, and so it is all good. Lift up your eyes, and look to *Me*, for I have given you that power, and you are sinking below your proper manhood if you do not exercise it; but do not try to leap off the earth for all that. Delight in the world as *My* world,

and then there will be no fear of its leading you away from me."

Here are some of the lessons of the Bible story of creation. We do not see their full force till we have experience of evil in ourselves. But in the lessons themselves there is as yet no whisper of evil. All is pronounced good; God stands over His twofold work, man and the world, the dwelling-place of man, and His blessing descends on both.

The next step brings us into the state into which sin has entered. I must not stop to point out the particulars. But I wish you to notice especially two things. First, the Bible does not begin with sin: it begins with innocence and goodness. That is its starting-point, and is meant to be our starting-point. Sin is not a proper part of ourselves: it has come into us as the mildew comes into the corn. We are to regard it as something foreign to us which we have to throw off. Our work is to purify not to destroy. Secondly, observe that the first evil is distinctly religious evil. The temptation comes through the fruit; but the great force of the temptation lies in impatience of the restraint which God for good reasons ordained; in trying to be independent of Him; in other words, of being as gods. And the first loss is a religious loss. To fly from God's presence is the immediate thought of those who before the fall had rejoiced in it. Then the other outward curses follow. The earth is no longer a garden but a place of thorns for those who have become estranged from its Maker and their own. Yet God does not hate His rebellious creature, though He visits him severely.

From the very beginning He provides a way of return. Toil and sorrow are henceforth man's lot. But they are not mere curses, it is man's own fault if he lets them be so. He may use them to lead him back into communion with his true Lord.

That however is a later lesson. At the first the rapid growth of evil is what is chiefly shown us. Estrangement from God leads to estrangement between men, even members of the same family. The husband becomes the accuser of the wife. The elder brother is jealous of the younger brother, and his jealousy has its natural fruit in murder. As mankind multiplies, so does crime. The earth, we are told, was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. Sin against God, cruelty and injustice against other men, went hand in hand. Then the just anger of God went forth, and used the powers of the world for the punishment of man. A flood of waters overwhelmed the sinful race, and only one small family was preserved. To these survivors, to Noah and his family, God renewed the blessing which He had given to Adam. He spoke of a covenant, an understanding, between Him and them and all their children's children. He made them understand that He was not a God who did according to His mere will and pleasure, but One whom they might trust as faithful and true.

Immediately however, evil sprung up afresh. It showed itself in a shameful want of respect in one of Noah's sons, towards his father. Presently we hear of men joining together to build a high tower, whose top might reach to heaven. This was evidently

done out of pride against God ; but He scattered them abroad on the face of the earth, and with the scattering came the beginning of different languages, so that henceforth the different branches of the same race became foreign to each other. .

Such are the chief points in the first part of Genesis. We have been shown first the outward world, the heavens and the earth, under which and on which all the work of man has to be done. Then we have been shown all the sinful and distracted world of man, seemingly going further and further away from God, and falling into wild confusion within itself. At this point the new life begins, which was to go on growing and growing till it reached its full height in the person of Christ. God called on an old man named Abram to leave his country and his father's house and go into a land which He should show him, promising to make of him a great nation, and in him to bless all the families of the earth. This was the seed of the Jewish people: here we have in a few words the plan of the whole Bible, God making Himself known to a chosen few, that through them the whole race may be partakers in the blessed gift. That which was to be the glory of God's people Israel was also to be a light enlightening the Gentiles far and near. And the beginning of it all was the simple trust of one man. "By faith," says the Epistle to the Hebrews, "he obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went." The rest of his life repeats the same strain in other forms. He who thus went forth into the wide world at God's command, believed in God's promise .

that he should have a son in spite of all appearances, and then at last was ready to yield up that dear and precious son, because such seemed to him to be God's will. And so he became known as the Father of the faithful, the father of all those who, seeing but a very little way for themselves, delight to trust the Unseen Lord, above all things, and bear witness in the simplest and purest way to that which is the true life for man.

I do not intend to go through the well-known stories of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Esau, of Jacob's journey and double marriage and return, and of all the changes of fortune which befel his favourite son Joseph through the envy of his brothers. I will only ask you to observe how wonderfully God's providence worked through all those things which seemed to be baffling it, and in particular what a strange chain of occurrences brought Jacob and his family into the land of Egypt, where it was needful they should pass their four hundred years of silent growth in the dark. There we must leave them for to-day, hoping next week to see them go forth as far as the borders of their Promised Land.

We began with the creation of the world: we end with the passage of a starving family from one land to another. In both cases the Bible is true to its own character: in both God is made known. We may see His working, if we will, in the boundless glory and wonder of the heavens and the earth. These are great and He is great in them. But deeper truths of His nature are declared to us in the thoughts and the doings of men; and for this teach-

ing we need neither to look on great and mighty men nor on vast hosts of men. The noblest work for mankind that He has ever ordained was begun when Abraham went forth from his home, carrying with him the undying seed of a true faith. We cannot measure the power which often lies in things which seem too small and trifling for our notice. It is on such that the choice of God lights. He chooses the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty, and He does so simply in satisfying the needs of their own spirits. Feeling themselves helpless and blind they cast themselves on His grace and wisdom; the answer from above makes them new men, lights shining in the darkness, and God is glorified in the influence which they shed around them, and pass on to their children's children.

IV

EXODUS -DEUTERONOMY

"I AM the Lord thy God, which I have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."—*Exodus* xx. 2.

WE began last Sunday to examine the first five books of the Old Testament. We saw that they are chiefly taken up with describing the history of the Jews in the early days before they reached their own land of promise, and became in the strictest sense a people. We had not time to go beyond the first book, that which is called Genesis, which word means 'birth' or 'beginning of growth.' There we found several beginnings, one behind the other—the beginning of the Jews, the beginning of mankind, the beginning of the world; all told however in such a way, and such a way only, as is required for the purposes of religion, that is, for enabling us to know and act upon our true position before God, and to give us a true idea of the greatness and goodness of His works and His acts.

This applies especially to the first eleven chapters.

of Genesis, and above all the first two chapters. There we have the great objects, God on the one side, the world on the other, and man in the midst between the two, set clearly before us in the true light. God is seen as distinct from the world, as making the world according to a regular plan or order, as making man after the world out of a part of the world, yet in His own heavenly likeness, as giving man dominion over the world, and teaching him that the world is for his use, whatever other purposes it may serve; as blessing the world and man alike, and calling both good. Then as a secondary thing, a blight coming from without upon that which was originally good, we see sin breaking in through the senseless pride and wilfulness of man. Then come fresh forms of sin ever growing from worse to worse—jealousy, hatred, murder, and a host of other abominations, rebellion against God going hand in hand with wrong-doing towards fellow-men, till the Flood came and swept them away. The world which God had given to be their home had within it powers of destruction as well as powers of nourishment; and at His command the waters went forth to destroy, to show that He hates evil, and that He is mightier than all.

One righteous man, Noah, and his family alone were saved. But the waters of the Flood had not washed away the taint of evil. Within Noah's own household appeared foul disrespect of the son for the father, a dark and threatening sign of the plague which, beginning within the family, should spread confusion and misery in all the dealings of men with

each other. We hear little of the dim ages which followed, as the race of Noah multiplied more and more and became scattered into different peoples. Suddenly out of the darkness rises a bright point of light, a true Star in the East, which has been growing and changing, and changing and growing from that moment till now, when it has become the bright world of the Christian faith. That point of light was the simple trust of one man, Abram the Hebrew, the first of the Jews, and so the beginner of the long course in which God has made Himself known to mankind through the Jews, our own true forefathers in things of the spirit. At God's command he went forth from the land where his family had dwelt, not knowing whither he went. This was the mark set on the chief actions of his life, that he walked by faith and not by sight that he let himself be guided by Him whom no man can see, instead of trusting to the deceitful appearances of things which meet the bodily eye.

After Abraham came Isaac his son, after Isaac his son Jacob or Israel. About these three, the three patriarchs, the book of Genesis has much to tell us which, as I said last Sunday, you will do well to read for yourselves, but which would be only confusing were I to repeat it now. Then we hear about Israel's twelve sons, and especially his son Joseph. The great point in all this for us to attend to is the way in which the family was in God's good providence brought into Egypt. First, there is the accident of the famine, then the accident of Joseph's extraordinary advancement in Egypt, so that what

the mean jealousy of his brothers meant for his harm turned out not only for his own good but for the saving of them all. Here is an undying lesson of the way in which accidents are in the hands of God, and how He uses them for His highest purposes. The purpose in this case was that the infancy of the Jewish people should be spent in Egypt, a land already far advanced in building and manufactures and all the useful and ornamental arts of life, but sunk in gross darkness in the higher things of worship and virtuous living. It was a necessary school for God's people, a school in which they learned evil as well as good, but without which their later growth was, as far as we can see, impossible.

Thus far, at the end of the book of Genesis, we reached last Sunday. Four hundred years, at least so it seems, have passed away when the story of the next book, the book of Exodus begins. We have now to hear how the children of Israel came to leave Egypt. The four books about which I have to speak to-day take in only forty years, indeed, properly speaking, only the beginning and the ending of those forty years. But they are forty years which the Jews never forgot, and which we should never forget, for, except at the time of Christ, no other time of forty years has told so greatly and so lastingly on the fate of mankind and on our own. Those forty years were spent in the passage from Egypt to the Land of Promise. What our four books tell us falls under two heads, the more important events that happened on that journey, and the laws which God gave His people by the way. These two subjects are brought

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close together in the text, which, as many of you know by the way it is quoted in the Catechism, is the proper heading to the Ten Commandments, the weightiest part of the law. "I am the Lord thy God which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage: thou shalt have none other gods but me," and so on.

It is impossible to take these four books one by one for our purposes. They all declare some part of the Law, all but one tell some of the events which happened on the journey. In the book called Exodus we have the story of the departure from Egypt and the early times of the wandering, the giving of the Law, and part of the Law itself. In the book called Leviticus we have chiefly those directions of the Law which had to do with the outward service of God. In the book of Numbers we have the numbering of Israel and many stories belonging to both the earlier and the later times of the forty years again with some parts of the Law. Lastly, in the book called Deuteronomy Moses is represented as in a manner repeating what has gone before in other words, recalling to the people shortly before his death some of the chief things that had befallen them preaching to them solemn warnings about their own conduct in the time to come, and pronouncing once more in an altered and improved shape many of the laws which had been earlier given. Then follows his death and burial, and so the book of Deuteronomy the fifth in the Bible, ends.

In what I have to say to-day I shall not attempt to keep these four books distinct. It will be much

clearer to treat them as if they formed one book, of which the contents should all be considered at once. One name binds the whole together. The first chapter of Exodus tells of the birth of Moses, the last chapter of Deuteronomy tells of the death of Moses. All that lies between is in one way or another concerned with Moses; he is always either leading the people or speaking to the people. Here we have at once a great step forward from what chiefly occupied us last Sunday. Then we had before us a single man, Abraham. That one man was the beginning of the Jewish people, they were all sprung from him, we might think of them as gathered up in him. That one man was also the friend of God, receiving messages direct from God, speaking to God as a man speaks to his friend. In him, the first of the Jews, notwithstanding his occasional wrong-doings, we seem to recognize once more that happy trustful intercourse with God which Adam is described as enjoying before his fall. But now at the beginning of Exodus God's promise to Abraham has been already fulfilled when He said to him, "I will make of thee a great nation." Instead of a lonely wanderer we have a whole people of wanderers. Instead of a single friend of God, conversing with God of the affairs of his own life, we have Moses the prophet of God speaking in God's name to the whole people, about the affairs of the whole people, speaking in the people's name to God; in a word, as St. Paul calls him, a mediator, or middle man between God and the people. Moses is the first example in the Bible of a true prophet, that is, of a man who

speaks to other men in the name and authority of God, whose own heart is first filled with a message which he knows to be from God, and then pours forth from his lips that which he feels himself constrained to speak. What his work as a leader was we learn from every chapter which describes what befel the people between Egypt and the Promised Land.

In the latter days of the stay in Egypt the children of Israel suffered much from the cruelty of King Pharaoh, who made slaves of them, and ground down their lives under the lash with the severest labour. Most of you know, I hope, the story of Moses' infancy and early manhood. You will remember how his heart was stirred up within him when he saw one of his brother Israelites ill-used by an Egyptian, so that he slew the Egyptian, and how he was obliged to flee away into the desert and keep sheep. There in the burning bush God made Himself known to him as the God of his father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He in whom those honoured forefathers had trusted and not been confounded was speaking now to the outcast slave, declaring His own purpose to deliver his enslaved brethren out of their bondage and bring them into the good Land of Promise, and appointing him to do the work. Moses returns to Egypt and fulfils God's command. After a series of wonderful signs which do not move the obstinate king, he leads out the children of Israel on the night of the Passover. The Red Sea is divided before them, and they march safely over, while the Egyptians, who follow, are

overwhelmed by the waters. Moses leads them on through the wilderness, following the guidance of God, in spite of their murmurs and doubts. Though they were the chosen people of God, they were also a crowd who had only just ceased to be slaves, and who had all the vices of slaves, who disliked the painfulness of being beaten and forced to work against their will; but, when they had been set free from that, shrank in a lazy and cowardly way from the duties and responsibilities of freedom, and would have been content to go back to slavery, if only they might have along with it once more the animal pleasures which, as slaves, they had been able to snatch. They hankered, we are told, after the flesh-pots of Egypt. But this could not be. God loved them too well to indulge them. His purposes for them were higher and better than they could imagine. He desired to train them to the full glory of freedom and manhood. He intended through them in due time to bless all the nations of the earth.

How then was He to begin to mould this disorderly half-brutish crowd into a true people fit to carry His name? There was but one way: by a law, by fixed commandments and rules which had to be obeyed. Till they were placed under the discipline of such a law, taking charge of all their actions, regulating their dealings with each other, their dealings with God, there was no possibility of their making any progress. But observe well what pains are taken to show that these restraints, these strict rules, these threats of punishment did not come from any mere love of power on God's part, any desire to

put forth His strength against His weak creatures, much less from any spite or cruelty in His feeling towards them, but solely from His anxious care to make them a great and holy people. Before a word is said about the Law, before God shows Himself as a strict ruler who will have His commands obeyed, He first lets Himself be seen only as a Saviour and Deliverer. He lays the foundation of all true knowledge of Himself in that. For fear they should forget or mistake the lesson, He repeats it in the most distinct words just before He begins to utter His commandments. 'I, who now speak to thee and am about to tell thee what thou must not do on pain of my displeasure, I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.' Observe also what care is taken that they should not suppose His demand for their obedience and worship to come from any petty greediness after honour such as a man might sow, and that they should not expect Him to be indifferent how they treated each other provided they give Him His due tribute of worship and reverence and Sabbath-keeping. Both these natural mistakes are guarded against beforehand. In six out of the ten commandments it is the rights of men, not the rights of God, that are protected. We saw last Sunday how at the Fall estrangement from God was immediately followed by estrangement among men, how before the flood the corruption of mankind before God is mentioned along with their violence against each other. It is the same here and all through the Bible. In the divine law the duty to

God and the duty to our neighbour stand side by side for ever. We are warned, on the one hand, against a religion which loses itself in mere religiousness, and neglects the common duties of life: we are warned, on the other hand, against the empty dream which deceives so many, that it is enough to be content with justice and kindness to our fellow creatures, while we render no homage to God in His own name and for His own sake, and remain strangers to His love and fear.

The Ten Commandments form but a very small part of the Law; but they are the part which concerns us far the most. The other precepts are rules for the guidance of a particular people at a particular time. After a while many of them seemed to have dropped into disuse: the people, in fact, outgrew them; they lost their original use, and became a mere burden too heavy to bear. But at first they were needed. When a people is in a young, unformed state, above all, when it is so disorderly and wilful as the children of Israel were in those days, nothing could serve but stiff rules to be obeyed, going even into the lesser matters of life. The laws given by Moses were chiefly intended to enforce just and merciful dealings among themselves, to keep them separate as a people set apart to God from the idol-worshipping and foully immoral nations around them, and in a great many different ways to lay down rules for the outward service of God. The people were not to invent for themselves ways of doing Him homage which they would be apt to regard as bribes to His majesty. They had simply to do as they

were bid, to offer to Him just what He commanded to be offered. But it was in offerings that their worship was chiefly to consist. Public prayer, such as makes up the greater part of our worship, was as yet unknown. They approached God through sacrifice—to yield up to Him a portion of the good things He had given them, to acknowledge in this practical way that they owed all to Him. This was the natural religious service of men who as yet had far more to do with acts than with words; and the *spirit* of that service remains the very Christian spirit. When we never tire of calling upon God to give, while we grudge every self-denial on our part for His sake, we are making no advance on the religion of those ancient Jews, we are but moving away from all true religion of any kind.

The tale of the wanderings of the children of Israel is a tale of murmurings and rebellions, followed by chastisements from God by which He strove to discipline and train them into a purer and more orderly state. The long continuance of the wanderings for the space of forty years was a punishment for the disobedience and threatenings against Moses and his brother Aaron, when the people were frightened at the report of the Promised Land brought back by the messengers, and refused to enter in. We keep up the memory of that time every morning service when we repeat God's warning in the Psalm, "To-day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness: when your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work. Forty years long

was I grieved with this generation, and said, 'It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways.'” For indeed, brethren, these things were written for our learning. We often hear the earth compared to a wilderness. In some moods of our minds, more especially in advanced life, that appears to us a sadly true comparison; we are ready to cry out that we meet with little but barrenness and hopeless labour and suffering. In other moods, and at a younger age, we are angry when a world so full of brightness and enjoyment appears to be condemned in this kind of language. In either case let us at least remember that the true sense of the word comes to us from those wanderings of the children of Israel in the wilderness, about which we have been hearing to-day. For our life here is truly a passage, a journey. We have left Egypt behind. God has called us as His children out of the darkness of nature. We are not, we cannot be, as those who have never heard His name or Christ's name. We may hanker back after the thoughtless fleshy self-indulgence natural to those who have never learned that there is a God in heaven, and a law of God to be obeyed on earth; but we never can satisfy ourselves with such things. They too often after a while turn to ashes in the mouth. Before us lies the land of rest, the state in which the peace of God so rules our hearts that we carry with us a perpetual heaven. Between our Egypt behind and our Land of Promise before we are ever moving, sometimes backwards, sometimes forwards. But God calls on us to press ever forwards, holding the beginning of our confidence steadfast.

unto the end. The hardening of heart through the deceitfulness of sin, which makes us, like dead stones, unable to feel the presence of the living God, the evil heart of unbelief and mistrust which cannot enter into His rest,—these are the things which mix thorns with the flowers of life and bitterness with its fruits, which prevent refreshment. We are on our way to God. Let us enjoy thankfully what He sends us by the way; but let us never forget whither we are bound, or allow ourselves to rest satisfied with anything short of Him who alone is our eternal home.

V

JOSHUA TO DAVID

“AND David perceived that the Lord had established him king over Israel, and that he had exalted his kingdom for his people Israel's sake.”— 2 *Samuel* v. 12.

WE have now gone over the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, as they are called, or the Law. We have watched the Jews passing through the first stages of their growth into a people. Two great names have stood out above the rest, worthy to stand for ever among the chief of those which ought to be remembered and honoured to the end of time, the names of Abraham and Moses. All mankind, and we all among the rest, have every reason for gratitude to those two ancient men, for the services which they rendered to their own people were rendered to a seed in whom all nations of the earth were to be blessed and have been blessed.

In Abraham, the best-marked figure of the book of Genesis, the first forefather of the Jewish people, we saw the Friend of God, the lonely man going

forth into the unknown world in simple and sheer reliance on a Lord whom he could not see. In Moses, whose words and deeds fill the four later books, the lawgiver and leader of the Jewish people, we saw the Prophet of God, the receiver of a message not for himself only but for his whole nation.

These were the leading men. What about the great unnamed, almost unnumbered people? We saw their early beginnings in Isaac and Jacob and Jacob's twelve sons, their passage into the rich and civilized old land of Egypt. We lost sight of them there four hundred years while they were undergoing a discipline which should fit them for growing on to more and more in the years to come. At the end of the time we saw them toiling and groaning under the yoke of cruel Egyptian masters, their delivery in the name of the Lord their God by the hand of Moses, their march forth into the wilderness, their receiving from God, on the holy mount of Sinai, a Law which was to rule them and restrain them and make them into a people indeed by teaching them how to obey, their wandering on still in the wilderness for forty years as a punishment for their rebellious wanderings, and at last their second arrival at the edge of the Promised Land. Then the first stage was done. The wandering in strange lands was over, the settled life in a home of their own was to begin.

Thus far Moses had brought them. He was to go no further. He too had sinned in the wilderness and was not allowed to enter himself into the land of so many expectations. He went up into a

mountain and looked far and wide over the new world on which they were to enter without him, and there he died. His work was done. When his wandering was ended, his life was ended too, and he entered into a different rest. Another took his place. That other was Joshua the son of Nun. From him the sixth book of the Bible, the book of Joshua, takes its name. The story of that book is the story of the taking possession of the Promised Land under the guidance of Joshua. He, we are told, "was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him: and the children of Israel hearkened unto him, and did as the Lord commanded Moses." They crossed the river Jordan, that sacred river of which we hear so often in the Bible, and then began the advance by which one part of the land after the other was occupied. For we must not suppose that the country given to the Jews was empty, or filled only with wild beasts. One of its names is the land of Canaan, and various tribes of heathen called Canaanites were already in possession of it. These heathen had to be driven out before a resting-place could be found for the Jews; and so we hear much of the taking of strong cities and battles with mighty armies. This was the time spoken of in the well-known words, "We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us what thou hast done in their time of old: how thou hast driven out the heathen with thy hand and planted them (that is, Thy people) in; how thou hast destroyed the nations, and spread them wide abroad. For they gat not the land in possession through their own sword, neither

was it their own arm that helped them; but thy right hand, and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance, because thou hadst a favour unto them."

Such is the light in which it is best for us to regard the terrible events of that time. The conquest of Canaan was wrought out by slaughter, and it is not easy for us who live in happier times to know what to think about those deeds of blood. Thus much however at least we may see, that God speaks to men according as they are able to receive His teaching. He does not go greatly beyond their powers of feeling and understanding. To those who can comprehend only in part He speaks in part; and there are lessons true and valuable at their own time which at a later time it is dangerous to follow too closely. The world under its great patient heavenly Teacher has learnt much since the days when the Jews entered into Canaan. To us God commands the mercy and love which all Christians profess to admire. For us to copy, or admire those who copy, the merciless destruction which they carried on against their enemies, would be wilful disobedience to His plainest will. It is a sad necessity to fight and slay at our country's bidding in ordinary warfare; yet even there every true soldier holds his hands, and rejoices to spare an enemy when he can do so with a good conscience. Even this much of bloodshed is, we trust, only for a while: it is our duty to pray and labour for the time when the cruel and jealous passions of men shall have so far been quieted that even, just and rightful wars may cease. And already we have learned or are learning from

Christ and His apostles that the warfare of Christians against that which is unchristian is not to be carried on by violence. By persecuting in Christ's name, by using in defence of the truth any weapons but those of example and persuasion, we do injury to the cause of God ; we hinder, not hasten the true spiritual conquest of men's hearts and minds.

Yet it would be well for us if we could look upon ourselves as the soldiers of God as truly as the Israelites. They were never allowed to think that God was permitting them to follow their own desires in all these wars. Achan, who took for himself some of the spoil, was stoned to death by Joshua's order. The Canaanites were to be destroyed, not for spite, not for plunder, but lest they corrupt God's people with their filthy idolatry, and beguile them away from the service of the Holy One. And oh, let us be sure that God hates all evil things as utterly as ever He did in the old time, and that His true servants now and always must hate them likewise and never weary in seeking to destroy them. For this cause the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, appeared on earth that He might destroy the works of the devil. The warfare has to be waged within and without, against our own darling passions and against the misery and wickedness which we see around us. The manner of the warfare is changed ; but so long as anything opposes itself to God and His righteous kingdom, so long life cannot cease to be a battle.

The next book is the book of Judges. It carries us on a further stage in the history. Joshua dies, and the advance of Jewish conquest comes to a

stand-still. For many generations, no one can say how many, there is a time of disorder and confusion. Scattered remnants of the ~~Israelites~~ continue in the land, and by their neighbourhood the children of Israel are tempted into sin and forgetfulness of God. They fall under the yoke of various oppressors. The most dangerous of these were the powerful nation who dwelt between them and the sea-coast, the nation of the Philistines. Then from time to time God raises up a mighty chief who brings back some sort of order into the wild lawlessness of his people, and enables them to shake off for a while the grasp of their enemies. These different chiefs are called judges, and give their title to the book. Four of them are specially named in the Epistle to the Hebrews for the divine faith which enabled them to carry on an unequal struggle against powerful oppressors. These are Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah. The story of their deeds is full of life and interest. We cannot look upon them for the most part as men of great holiness of life or purity of religion. But they had a rough work to do and they did it manfully. Not only were their labours made to serve a great purpose, not only were they instruments in the hands of God. They *knew* and *felt* that they were His instruments; and whatever of dark and earthly character may have been mingled in their life, they suffered and strove in His name for the cause of His people with a zeal which we might envy in these lukewarm days.

After the book of Judges comes the book of Ruth. Every one likes to read that beautiful story; but it

must not detain us long now. The chief point which concerns us is one that we might easily miss, though it is hinted at in the first chapter of St. Matthew. The last verses are the key to the whole book. The son of Boaz and Ruth was the forefather of King David and so of our Lord Himself. That highly honoured Ruth was not of Jewish blood. She came from Moab, that foreign nation which was so often at war with Israel. In a later day St. Peter declared to the Jews, "The promise is to you and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call," and even in that early time the example of Ruth proclaimed to all the people how they themselves owed everything, not to any accident of their birth, but to the calling of God in heaven, and that it was His will to call others besides themselves to share the glory which He had bestowed on them.

The only other books on which I propose to speak to-day, making up five altogether, are the two books of Samuel. Their fifty-five chapters carry us over no great length of years, over not much more than a long life-time. Three famous names fill the two books—Samuel, Saul, David. One mournful verse marks the last few chapters of the book of Judges, occurring wholly or in part several times: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." The books of Samuel describe how that state of things passed away, and by degrees the kingdom was set up, first in a king after the people's own heart, then in a king after God's own heart. Not till that late time, till

the very reign of David himself, was the work ended which Joshua began, the conquest of the land was complete, and the people entered on the perfect enjoyment of God's promises.

But we must first consider the earlier steps. In the opening chapters we see the hopeless miserable state of the land. There was no one to lead the way to a noble life. The people had sunk into ungodliness and evil doing. The memory of God and His service was just faintly kept up at the holy tabernacle or tent which had been the outward sign of God's dwelling among His people while they journeyed through the wilderness. We can see the harmless but feeble old priest, Eli, too sinfully good-natured to restrain his wicked sons, serving God himself, but powerless to stir up any right spirit around him. Then we see the young child set apart by his parents to the Lord, ministering before Eli, waked by the voice of the Lord in the stillness of the night and sent with a message of melancholy prophecy and rebuke to Eli his master. That is the beginning. In the face and voice of that holy child we feel the dawning of a new and better day. He grows up. The Lord, we are told, was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground, and all Israel from Dan even to Beersheba, from the furthest north to the furthest south, knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord.

A few chapters later we read, "Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life." The judges of the wild time before him had been rough soldiers. Here now was a judge who was also a prophet, renewing

the memory of that Moses whose name was linked with all their highest recollections of the past. There were perhaps no very marked events of his long rule, nothing, that is, which would make a striking story. His influence seems to have been of that quiet but never ceasing kind, the effect of which is hardly noticed till afterwards. He lived to prepare the way for that which should come after him.

In Samuel's old age the elders of Israel came to him asking him to make them a king like the nations round about. There is no reason to think that it was against God's will for them to have a king sooner or later ; but the temper in which they asked for it now was displeasing to Him. It showed that they did not believe Him to be really ruling over them, because they could not see Him. It betrayed a wish for a mighty captain to lead them to battle rather than a just judge between man and man, a restrainer of tyrannous great men, a friend of oppressed humble men. Here came an ever memorable lesson of the meaning of God's judgments. This sin of theirs He could not but punish. But why did He punish it? Was it to take revenge for their neglect of Him? No, it was that they might repent of their sin and see the folly of it and cast it away. And there was no way to bring this about so sure as the letting them have **their way**. Then by experience they would find out what true government contains.

So they were allowed to have the king they desired. Saul, a mighty man of power, handsome and tall, was anointed by Samuel in the Lord's

name, and proclaimed king over Israel. His whole story is most touching to read from its mixture of worthy purposes and paltry actions. There is in him no great deliberate wickedness. It always seems as if he might so easily have grown strong in goodness. But his course is a downward course. With all our interest in him, we feel him to be a poor and worthless king, indulging his people just when he ought to have restrained them, wholly unable at last to save them from the Philistine yoke.

In the last years of his life his story is intertwined with that of David. After one of his foolish acts of perverse disobedience, Samuel is sent to anoint another king. The youngest of Jesse's seven sons, who was busy feeding sheep, is chosen out by the Divine command, because, unlike the foolish elders of Israel, the Lord looketh on the heart, not on the outward appearance. This young shepherd was David. Soon after, he ~~slays the giant Goliath~~ with a pebble from his sling, and excites the jealousy of Saul by the praise which he receives. Presently to save his life from Saul's attacks he has to flee away and live the life of an outlaw; yet ever in that banishment from the ordinary ways of civilized men keeping up a high level of justice and honour, and generously sparing Saul's life when he had the power to take it. At length Saul is killed in battle with the Philistines, and with him his son Jonathan David's dearest friend: and David pours forth his sorrow for father and son together.

This was the worthy beginning of David's reign, which fills the second book of Samuel. The spirit

of the whole is expressed in the words of the text, "David perceived that the Lord had established him king over Israel, and that he had exalted his kingdom for his people Israel's sake." The growth of the people was complete at last, the kingdom was duly established, and the mark of a true godly kingdom was upon it, for the king reigned not for his own good but for his people's good. The earthly king's government was a true image of the heavenly king's government. A heart like the heart of God was beating in the breast of him who sat on the throne of Israel. His justice, his self-devotion were worthy to teach men the true mind of their Lord in heaven. Two things about David I pass over now. His grievous wrong-doing will require a few words next time. His psalms we shall have to consider later on, when the book of Psalms is before us. What concerns us to-day is his place in Jewish history with reference to what has gone before, his character as the crown and head of Israel. In him the history of the Old Testament reaches its highest point. No name that we have not yet touched is equal to his till we come to Christ Himself, called in the first verse of the New Testament the Son of David and Son of Abraham. By that name He was welcomed in shouts of triumph as He entered Jerusalem, when the people cried, "Hosanna to the Son of David, blessed be He that cometh in the name of the Lord." By that name He was beseechingly implored by the blind and wretched, and we too now repeat their cry so rich in meaning, when week by week we pray, "O Son of David, have mercy on us!"

VI

THE KINGS, THE CAPTIVITY, AND THE RETURN

“FOR Zion’s sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth.”—*Isaiah* lxii. 1.

LAST Sunday we considered the second five books of the Old Testament—the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and Samuel. They conducted us through all the early times of the stay of the Jews in their own land and their complete growth into a people. We saw how they entered the land under the guidance of Joshua after the death of Moses, how they took many cities of the Canaanites and destroyed the inhabitants, and established themselves in the midst, the whole land being portioned out among the different tribes descended from the sons of Jacob. In the book of Judges we saw the rough and unsettled state in which they continued for many generations, helped forward now and then by mighty men called judges, who rose up to lead them against their

various enemies, and at times to bring their own irregularities under something like order and government. Next we saw the young child Samuel in the tabernacle by the side of the old priest Eli, and then growing up into a judge of a higher and better sort, a judge who was also a prophet, who helped to draw the people together in God's name, and spoke to them the words of God. Lastly we saw this last of the judges giving place to the kings, anointing them himself before the Lord to their great office; first, Saul, the king after the people's own heart, the tall and stately soldier whom they rejoiced to have over them to lead them against their enemies the Philistines, but who without any great wickedness only dragged them down lower and lower by indulgence to their fancies and his own, and allowed them to fall a prey to their enemies; and then, as their second king, David, the king after God's own heart. We saw him chosen out by Samuel when he was a shepherd boy, persecuted by Saul from jealousy of the honour paid to him as the slayer of the giant Goliath, upholding honour and justice while living as an outlaw among outlaws, sparing his persecutor's life when he had it in his power, mourning for his persecutor's death, and at last himself becoming a king of the noblest kind, one who lived for the good of his people, and governed them in fearless righteousness. Thus the people had in the end reached their full growth, and all that was best in them shone forth in their head and king. That later suffering King of the Jews, who was also to be King of the whole earth, whom we call our Lord, was hailed in the days of

His earthly life as the Son of David, and is still worshipped by the whole Church throughout the world under the same name.

Unhappily there was a worm in the bud of all this greatness both of king and of people. Both had reached a height from which it seemed impossible to sink down. But let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. The wonderful beauty and nobleness of character which rose higher and higher through the various buffetings and troubles of David's youth and early manhood, and which brought such blessings to his people after he had become king, was after all not strong enough to stand fast to the end against the temptations of good fortune and the power to do whatever he would. This pattern king, the man after God's own heart, condescended to adultery and murder. Most sincerely, most bitterly, he repented the sin: the prophet's word convinced him in a moment that he, the ruler and example of his people, had been guilty of that miserable baseness which it had been his pride all his life to scorn and hate in others. When he humbled himself before the King in heaven, God forgave him his disloyalty; but the punishment had still to be borne. He was hunted out of his city by his own favourite son, Absalom, and made to taste once more in his old age with tenfold bitterness the hardships and dangers of his youth. He came back at last a broken and saddened man, and there is a shadow over all the rest of his reign. That which to him had been punishment had been sin in the people. Their mad wilfulness in following Absalom was a dark sign, it

boded ill for the days to come. But for the present all things seemed to go well.

We enter to-day on a new time, the time of the kings after David. In a very few pages we read the story of four hundred years. The two books of Kings, after describing the last months of David's life, are taken up with an account of all the kings that came after him, and with the doings of the people so long as they remained in their own land. The books of Chronicles go no further. They repeat the same history in a shorter form, sometimes telling over again the same events, at other times bringing in fresh matter. They begin with a long account of the families of the Jews, and then go on with what happened after the death of Saul. The first book of Chronicles runs side by side with the second book of Samuel, with which we ended last Sunday, and the second book of Chronicles with both the books of Kings with which we begin to-day.

We have had one great king of the Jews, David himself. We come now to another great king of the Jews, a son of David, Solomon. Each reign has a character of its own: each is in its own way an image of the everlasting kingdom of Christ Himself. "Thou hast girded me with strength of battle" is the thanksgiving of David: he was a man of war, a conqueror. Solomon in coming after him succeeded to a happier inheritance: he was a prince of peace. David is the pattern of the righteous king, Solomon of the wise king. Solomon reigned over a great empire. The kings of neighbouring peoples were glad to do him honour. The Jews were never

masters of so wide an extent of land before or after as in his days. Trade and commerce flourished. No outward mark of peaceful prosperity was wanting. The king himself began his reign in a spirit which promised well for the coming time. He asked God neither for long life nor for riches nor for victory over his enemies ; but for a wise and understanding heart to discern between good and bad, that he might be able to do true justice among so great a people ; and immediately the wisdom given in answer to his prayer was put to a sore trial, and proved itself equal to the need ; and all Israel, we are told, feared the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to do judgment.

This is the first great mark of Solomon's reign. The ruler of the people is also the wisest of the people. The second mark is of another kind ; we must attend to it well, if we would understand the rest of the Bible. It is the building of the temple. That we may see what the building of the temple meant, let us go back a little. You will remember that at the time when the children of Israel were journeying through the wilderness from Egypt to the Land of Promise, having meanwhile no fixed resting-place, no roof over their heads at night, but dwelling in tents which they carried with them on the journey, they carried also in the midst one great tent called the Tabernacle. That was the tent of God, the mark of His constant presence. Without such a mark there was reason to fear that they might think of Him as far off from them. He wished them to know that He was in the midst of them. Wherever

they moved He moved too. Their many tents clustering round His one tent were a sign to them how He was the Lord of one and all, and how in drawing near to Him they were drawing near to each other. In that tabernacle He was worshipped. The religious services which He appointed were performed there. There too was the ark of the Covenant, the most sacred thing of all, in which were lodged various memorials of His great deliverance. He was a God of men, not a God of a mountain or a river. When they looked on His tabernacle sharing in all that befel their own tents, they were helped to believe in Him as indeed the God of Israel, bound up with their recollections of the past and their hopes for the future.

After they entered the Promised Land, the tabernacle of the wanderings did not lose its honour and holiness. While the conquest of the land was being carried out, the tabernacle went with the army; and when the people settled down in their own homes it was fixed at Shiloh. When the ark was carried off, by the Philistines, the tabernacle which had been as an outer covering to the ark came to be less thought of. In the days of Samuel, Saul, and David, it rested at different places, and at last at Gibeon, while David made a new tabernacle for the ark in his own new city of Jerusalem. It was impossible that both tabernacles should continue to stand, and David proposed in place of either to build at Jerusalem a fixed temple, a house of God instead of a tent of God. It was indeed a time to be remembered in the history of Israel. Till then the land

had had no capital, as we call it, no great mother city, to give the middle point for all the people. Think what England would be without London, and you can have some slight notion of the change made when David took the old heathen city of Jerusalem and made it the head city, the middle place of his kingdom. Then first, as I said before, the people was fully grown. Their divisions were healed; they were joined for a while as one man. Their rest in the land of rest till now had been broken by having to struggle with enemies within it. Now it was become quite their own, and they could rest indeed in settled homes. The time was come for a glorious house of God to rise in the midst of the houses of men. "See now I dwell in a house of cedar," said King David to the prophet Nathan, "but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains." He could not bear the thought that the place of God's presence should be lodged meanly, while he was lodged richly. But he was forbidden to build the temple himself. That, he was told, was for his son, and so when the peaceful Solomon was settled in his kingdom, he began to build the temple of the Lord. He knew, as he said, that the heaven of heavens cannot contain the Most High: yet he rightly prepared for Him a house set apart from all common uses, which should bear His name and be the sign of His presence, and he rightly poured forth upon this house of God all his riches to make it beautiful and wonderful to behold. That temple of Solomon, brethren, was the beginning of our churches. The temple holds the middle place in all the rest of the Bible, Old Testament and New

Testament. When Jerusalem was trodden down and destroyed in the days of the latest apostles, as our Lord had foretold, the temple, which stood on the same ground as Solomon's temple, was destroyed. God was henceforth to be worshipped no longer only at Jerusalem; He was to be known as the Lord of all nations. The only one temple henceforth was the temple which St. John in the Revelation saw opened in heaven; but there was the same need as ever for marking the presence of God among His people. Our churches are much more than temples. Christian worship is far better than any worship offered in the temple at Jerusalem, because it has in it more of the spirit and more of the understanding. Our churches are places where we ourselves meet to praise God together, to pray to Him together, to hold communion with Him together. But they are also *His* houses, *His* temples, signs that where we are dwelling, He is dwelling too.

The latter end of Solomon's reign is sad to think of. His many heathen wives turned away his heart after other gods. He had freely spent his riches in building a temple for the Lord, but he did not keep his own heart pure and true to the Lord: that divine temple he neglected. His sin no doubt spread far and wide among the people. The worship of idols came in once more in the very sight of the new temple. When he died, and his son Rehoboam became king, a day of reckoning followed. By his bad conduct as a ruler Rehoboam goaded a large part of the people into rebellion. Ten out of the twelve tribes, or, as we might say, counties, refused to

obey him and set up another king: only two remained faithful to him. Thus the one people of God was henceforth split into two kingdoms, sometimes at war with each other, nearly always separate, cursed with a divided worship, divided laws, a divided name. From this time the ten tribes are called the kingdom of Israel or Ephraim, the two tribes are called the kingdom of Judah.

It would be quite beside my purpose to repeat to you the story of the two kingdoms. I can only mark out for you the great turning-points of the Bible. Cut off from Jerusalem and the temple, the kingdom of Israel fell at once into idol worship. That and the sins which accompanied it stained the whole people from first to last. Yet great and true prophets were not wanting; and the deeds of Elijah and Elisha remind us that God did not forsake even those who were estranged from His holy place and from the kingly family of David. The story of the kingdom of Judah is sad enough likewise. Now and then, as in the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah, a bright light seems to spring up, and then it fades away once more into the gloom of sin and forgetfulness of God. The end of both kingdoms is the same. Both become the victims of powerful foreign nations. The kingdom of Israel is destroyed by the Assyrians, who carry the people away into captivity. The kingdom of Judah, often threatened, often reduced to sore straits, lasts on three or four generations longer, and then its day of doom comes. Jerusalem is taken, and the people of Judah are dragged away as captives to Babylon. So end the

books of Kings and Chronicles. From that day to this no Jewish king has sat on David's throne. This is the carrying away into Babylon spoken of in the first chapter of St. Matthew as finishing the second of the three great spaces of time between Abraham and Christ. The first ends with David, the second ends here.

We know very little of what befel the people in the land of their captivity. Various prophecies and psalms, to which we must return another day, belong to this time, and show what was in the hearts of the best among them. But what happened to them can only be gleaned from a few chapters of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and the book of Esther. All particulars I shall pass over. But observe two great facts. One is that for a considerable time there were Jews dwelling in the heart of a heathen kingdom, making their spiritual power felt there, and receiving back new lessons which they were to carry with them in after times. Another thing to be remembered is the lasting effect of this sore chastisement from God. Whatever their future sins might be, they had done with idol worship for ever.

The two books which follow the books of *Chronicles*, *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*, tell us how that miserable captivity came to an end, at least for part of the people. They had become at last the servants of Cyrus, king of Persia, a wise and good ruler, whose own religion was the purest and best of all heathen religions. He is spoken of in the later chapters of *Isaiah* as the Lord's own anointed, the Lord's shepherd, who should perform all His pleasure. Thus

God was making Himself known in new ways, showing that other nations besides the Jews were cared for by Him, and that He delighted in the goodness even of those who were strangers to His covenant. So a step was being taken towards the great Christian doctrine, that God is no respecter of persons.

Cyrus sent forth the chief of the fathers of the two tribes of the kingdom of Judah to go back to their own land, and build the house of the Lord which was in Jerusalem. He sent back with them the vessels of gold and silver which had been carried away out of the temple. In this way a remnant of the people came back out of captivity. They had hindrances of all sorts in building the temple. But at last the work was done, and regulations made for keeping the people strictly separate from their heathen neighbours. So ends the history of the Old Testament. A few chapters of the prophets come a little later down, but only a little. Above four hundred years more were to pass before Christ should be born, and for that time we have only the books called the Apocrypha, a few chapters of which are read in church on saints' days: books full of excellent teaching mixed with some fables; well worth reading, but never to be put on a level with the Old and New Testaments. What we require to know about the Jews in the times before Christ came is sufficiently told us in the Old Testament itself. As I began by saying, the purpose of the whole Bible is to teach us the ways of God: whatever does not help towards that, we can do without knowing.

The story of the people who sprang from Jacob's sons begins with a deliverance out of bondage: the Lord God who gave them the law was He who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. Their story, so long as it belongs to the Old Testament, ends with a second deliverance from bondage, a deliverance carrying with it a message not of love only, like the first deliverance, but of forgiveness. For the bondage in Babylon was due to their sins; the deliverance *from Babylon* is a pledge that God's love is not quenched by sin, though sin compels it to take new forms. God's dealings with each separate soul among us are written large in His dealings with His ancient people. In his tender loving-kindness He brought them back chastened and purified from Babylon. Yet when they rejected His blessed Son He cast them out once more as homeless wanderers on the face of the earth. Yet not for ever, St. Paul bids us believe: the gifts and calling of God He never takes back. He goes unweariedly on, fashioning His creatures to His own high ends. He cannot cease to punish or to forgive so long as there is sin to be punished or forgiven. And why? Because His mercy endureth for ever, and He never forsakes the work of His own hands. "For Zion's sake he will not hold his peace, and for Jerusalem's sake he will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth."

VII

THE PROPHETS

"**THEN** the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord. Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth."—*Jeremiah* i. 4-9

THE last time that I spoke to you about the Old Testament, we had before us those books which describe the history of the Jews from the end of David's reign till the return from Babylon. In the two books of Kings and the second book of Chronicles we had the events which befel the people in their own land under their own kings. In the book of Esther we had a single story out of the captivity. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah we had the return from the captivity, and the means taken after the return to preserve the people of God in separate-

ness and purity. After these books, the last of those which are often called the historical books of the Old Testament, *i.e.* those which tell us about men's *doings* and God's teaching by what befel them, we come to a totally different set of books, which contain men's *sayings* and God's teaching by the *truth* which they contain. I do not mean that the first set of books has in it nothing but doings, and the second nothing but sayings. The book of Deuteronomy, for instance, is in most parts more like a sermon than a story. And in the books to which we are now coming we shall find here and there chapters which are nothing but story. Still, on the whole, the distinction between the two sets of books is well kept up, and you will find it a real help to yourselves in reading the Old Testament to bear it in mind. In the books from Genesis to Nehemiah we have the *works* of God and man; in the books from Job to Malachi we have the *words* of God and man.

The books which still remain for us to consider belong to two great divisions. First come five called in our English Bible Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Solomon's Song. Then come seventeen called the Books of the Prophets. Up to this time I have been able to keep strictly to the order of books as we find them in the Bible. But to-day I shall venture to change the order a little, keeping the five books which follow Nehemiah for another time, and taking first the books of the prophets. There are two reasons for doing this. One is that the books of the prophets are more closely connected with the history of the kings and of the captivity with which

we were last occupied than even the Psalms and Proverbs are with David and Solomon. The other is that some of the lessons of the prophets have a special fitness for to-day, the last Sunday before Good Friday, and at the same time the last Sunday before Easter Day.

It is particularly important to see the connexion between the books of the prophets and the events which befel the Jews under the kings and after the two kingdoms had come to an end, because otherwise it is not possible to understand more than a small part of the prophecies. The prophets were raised up by God chiefly at times of great need to speak to His people the words which just at that moment it was especially necessary for them to hear. They were not men who lived away from their countrymen and brought messages out of the air, as it were; messages that might just as well have been delivered at any time, and which would be equally suitable to all people under all circumstances. They were men born and bred in the midst of the people, mixing with the people in all the affairs of their lives, suffering with the people in their sufferings, rejoicing with the people in their deliverances and turns of good fortune, feeling the burden of the people's sins as their own, eagerly embracing God's great mercy and forgiveness for themselves as sinners along with the rest of the people. Their whole minds were thus fashioned by all the changes within and without, the hopes and fears, the troubles and the blessings, which were rising and falling around them. Everything that came near them entered more deeply into their hearts than

into any hearts, left more lasting traces there, and kindled more powerful and active feelings. Thus the prophecy and the story fit into each other, as it were, because the one grew out of the other, and was intended in its turn to tell upon the other. The story, as given us in the books of Kings and Chronicles, for instance, is so short that we are not always able to trace its bearing upon the prophecy. But we ought never to forget that there *was once* a story belonging to *every* prophecy: and thus it is that the prophecies are still well suited to our own story, able to teach us to understand what has befallen us in our past lives, and able so to enlighten us as to what lies still before us.

For there is another side to the matter. The prophets were not only the men who shared most deeply in all that befel the people. They were also the men through whom God spoke to the people. This indeed is just what makes them prophets. A prophet in the strictest sense of the word is simply God's spokesman to men. It does not follow from this that the words are not his own too. It is not as though God had written down in the prophet's mind a particular set of words which he has nothing to do but read off as if he were reading a book aloud. The words are his own, nay, the thoughts are his own: only somehow within and behind them all is the Spirit of God, raising and purifying all the powers of his spirit. The voice of God and the voice of man are thus in a manner there together; we cannot tell the one from the other; the more completely the voice comes from the innermost depths of the

man, the more completely is it also the voice of God.

But in what way does the influence of the Spirit of God show itself in the prophets? First, in their tracing the happiness and the misery of men to the true roots, their love of good or their love of evil, their trust in God and keeping of His holy law, or their forgetfulness of Him and sinning against His commandments. We find in the prophets no fanciful and forced contempt for prosperity or misfortune, for any of the enjoyments of life or the miseries of life. They do not pretend to say that these ought not to be rejoiced in, or those felt as sore trials. But they do teach most plainly that the people or the man whose heart is set first on God and His blessed will is in the right way, and has a peace and joy which nothing can destroy. And they teach, on the other hand, that the people or the man who leaves God out of his thoughts and follows nothing but his own pleasure or pride or advantage is in the wrong way, however he may seem to prosper, and has within him a running stream of bitterness which poisons everything that he tastes.

This is one of the great lessons taught by the prophets; but it is one taught also by all true and wise preachers in all ages. There is another much more rare, which is found more remarkably still in the prophetic books of the Old Testament; and that is the necessity of looking backwards and forwards if we would see our present way aright. "I stand continually upon the watchtower" says Isaiah in one place. This is just what the prophets are always

doing. They are standing as it were on watchtowers, on places rising high above the level of ordinary life, from which they can look over a great breadth of country in all directions. Every one knows how much we are deceived by the mere nearness of things, when we cannot see more than a few things at once. Small things appear great; everything is seen only on one side. If we look back after we have gone on a little distance, we are surprised to see how different the same object looks now from what it did a little while ago. Now this is just what is happening to us every day in the serious affairs of life. We forget to look backward, we forget the experience which all looking back teaches, we are taken up with what is just before us, and we let ourselves be tricked by all its deceitful appearances. We live only for the moment.

Yet this is the destruction of all true and divine life. Man is man because he is a being looking before and after, one who makes full use of memory and of foresight, that he may order his life not in little single fragments but as one great whole, worthy of a creature permitted to understand and to carry out in part the counsels of the Most High God. The great work of the prophets of the Jews was to be ever rousing the Jews to a recollection of this their high calling; to be renewing in their minds the memory of their own lives and of the life of the people before they were born, explaining to them God's dealings with their forefathers, and helping them to see where they were themselves now standing. This was their work as towards the past. It

was a not less necessary work to lead the people to keep the future ever in view. The Jews were above all nations, as I have said on former occasions, the people of hope: *i.e.* hope in the future was a leading thought in the minds of all their best and greatest men. The looking forward to the Promised Land in their early days was a sign of that reaching ever onwards which was never wholly to depart from the people in later days. The foundation of the hope was in the promises of God. Where faith in Him died away, the hope unavoidably died away too. No depth of misery appeared too great for Him to bring to an end, as He had brought the Egyptian bondage to an end. No depth even of sin appeared to kill His promises, though it might render their fulfilment far far distant, since the Holy One could never be satisfied with continuance in unholiness.

In this way the prophets who were the spokesmen of God were also distinguished by the keen and true sight with which they looked into the future, and the eagerness with which they spread forth before the eyes of the people their visions of the future. Their prophecies are not in the least like the pretended forecasts of fortune-tellers, not mere readings of a story of things to come just like readings of a story of things already past. What they did was to cast upon the future the light which came from so much of God's everlasting counsels as He had revealed to them through the past and the present. "In thy light shall we see light" was the leading thought of their minds. Even the darkness which covers all the time not yet born is not wholly dark to those who

have the light which comes from knowing God's ways. But once more let me repeat, their great task, as they looked forth from their watchtowers, was to raise the people by turning the people's own eyes steadily forwards. For us men, God and the future are linked together in a wonderful union. In this stage of the world it is difficult, almost impossible, to look up constantly to God without the help given by looking ever forward and forward to the glory which shall be revealed. And it is equally difficult not to be sunk in the cares and interests of the moment, but to have an eye without ceasing to the far-off life of ourselves and of our race, without hearty converse with Him who is the Lord of all the ages. To keep down the fears which spring from a knowledge of the evil in ourselves and the evil in the world we need the ever renewed assurance that His counsel shall stand, and that He will do all His pleasure.

I have dwelt at some length upon the office of the Jewish prophets in general, because this is the master key to the understanding of all their different books. If these thoughts are impressed on your minds, it will not be necessary to go minutely into the particular characters of each. Still it is most important to notice that they have each a distinct character, and to observe how they were affected by the great changes which befel the people.

When you read the books of Kings and Chronicles, you will see many prophets mentioned there from whom we possess no written prophecies. The fact is that long written prophecies, such as make up our

books of the prophets, belong only to the later times. The earlier prophets wholly or chiefly spoke in short and simple messages, valuable for their own day, but not rising to the far-reaching wisdom of such men as Isaiah. The beginnings of prophecy go a long way back in the history. We have already seen that Moses, the leader of the people on their first going forth from Egypt, was a prophet; and so was Samuël, the leader and judge who prepared the way for their being governed by kings. Nathan, who boldly rebuked King David for his great sin, was a prophet likewise, and all his words have a true prophetic sound. Afterwards we hear of various sayings and doings of not a few prophets, and it is evident that there were many more of whom no record has come down to us. They were not confined to the kingdom of Judah where Jerusalem was, and the holy temple of God, and the true worship of God, and the kingly family of David. After the miserable separation in the days of Rehoboam, about which we heard last time, when ten of the tribes were split off and formed a new half-idolatrous kingdom of their own, the kingdom of Israel or Ephraim, God raised up prophets there as well as in Judah. Indeed, I suppose the most lively picture of a prophet which occurs to our minds is that of Elijah, the rugged prophet of Israel, who stood forth to rebuke the idolatries of king Ahab and his queen Jezebel.

The prophecies of Joel were called forth by a terrible calamity. The land had suffered much from inroads of the heathen, much from a long drought, but most of all from several visitations of locusts,

large insects like grasshoppers, which devour a whole crop in a few hours, and leave wide spaces of country bare without a blade of green. Joel invites the stricken and starving people to humble themselves before the Lord, and then looks forward to a time when the Spirit of the Lord shall be poured out upon all flesh, and His love and favour to His people shall be known before the world. Here we have the simplest form of written prophecy. Prophecies of the same kind, but with a stronger feeling that the people of God were not less but more guilty than others when they sinned against God, make up the book of Amos, the herdman and gatherer of sycamore fruit, as he calls himself, who came forth from his country home to declare the word of the Lord, and boldly faced the king's anger. In Hosea we have a striking instance of the way in which the life of the prophet himself was used by God as part of His teaching. But it would take too long to go through all the prophets. The marvellous words of Isaiah in some of the early chapters were called out by a great danger in the reign of Hezekiah, when the overwhelming army of the Assyrians was threatening to destroy Judah, as they had destroyed Israel a few years before. In Jeremiah and Ezekiel we are brought to the miseries of the last days of Judah, when the cup was at length full, and after great troubles within the city the Babylonians were allowed to carry the people into captivity. In the book of Daniel, which is in many respects unlike any of the other prophecies, we are made to feel how even in captivity the people were still the people of God,

compelling in His name the respect of their heathen conquerors, and, on the other hand, enabled to see that all the nations of the earth were in God's hand, and that He had a work for each of them to do in His own due time. Then in the later chapters of Isaiah, the greatest and loftiest part of all Old Testament prophecy, we see the renewal of better times; and the hope of the return from captivity broadens out into a vision of new glory for Israel, spreading light over the whole world. And lastly, in Haggai and Zechariah, and a little later in Malachi, we are brought among the returning Jews themselves, the rebuilding of the ruined temple, and at last the fresh growth of sins which called for God to come down as a consuming fire to purify His people from their dross. They are bidden to remember the Law of Moses the first prophet, and are told that Elijah the fearless prophet of Israel shall come once more to prepare the way of the Lord, and so with a mingled voice of prophets early and late, and a renewal of the Law itself, the Old Testament ends.

Thus far it might seem as if the great promises of God to Israel had closed in failure. But deep in the heart of prophecy a new thought had meanwhile long been growing. The hopes of deliverance by degrees came together into the hope of a deliverer, a true conqueror and king whom God should send. Then when it became clearer that the people was its own worst enemy, and that deliverance from locusts, and plagues, and earthquakes, and foreign armies, was of little avail while sin had the mastery, it was seen likewise that the deliverer must be one who suffered

with his people, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, who felt the people's sins as his own, and bore on his own shoulders the iniquity of all. How that expectation was fulfilled, we shall hear on Good Friday.

But again, it was mixed with brighter hopes than Israel had known before. In the terrible captivity Israel had seemed to go down into death; and the return from captivity was like a return out of death, a life restored to dry bones, which hinted an assurance that after all death need not be the last thing, but that life might come once again where death had seemed to prevail. How that expectation was fulfilled, we shall hear on Easter Day.

The opposite feelings of passionate grief and exulting hope, which strive for the mastery in Old Testament prophecy, meet together in the coming week, which is filled with the Saviour's sorrows and ends on the eve of His joyful resurrection. But remember, brethren, to us God has given not a prophecy only but a gospel. He has not merely taught us to ask and to hope. He has given, and He has fulfilled. Our faith is that Christ *has* died, and Christ *has* risen.

VIII

JOB, PSALMS, PROVERBS, ECCLESIASTES

"WHEN he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the lightning of the thunder ; then did he see it, and declare it ; he prepared it, yea, and searched it out. And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom ; and to depart from evil is understanding."—*Job* xxviii. 26-28.

ON the last Sunday before Easter we entered on the second half of the Old Testament, that part of it which deals chiefly with the *words* of God, which words of God are also the words of men ; as the earlier part described the *acts* of God, the ways in which His Providence ordered the *doings* of men. We took first the books of the prophets, and I tried to show you how needful it is in reading their prophecies to remember that they were first spoken in the midst of stirring times, of which we have a short account chiefly in the books of Kings and Chronicles. A prophet, we saw, is a man who speaks to other men in God's name and on God's behalf. But he is prepared for his office by entering more

strongly and deeply than other men into all that is going on around him. Whatever he speaks is coloured by the events, the thoughts, and the feelings of his own time, which take hold on his own heart. And again whatever he speaks is meant to tell upon his own people and his own time: when he warns or rebukes or encourages or inspires, it is of them and their needs that he is thinking. Yet his words have an abiding life in them, which makes them fit and profitable to be spoken to *us*, because the Spirit of God Himself is in them. This influence from above shows itself not merely in the way in which all the prophets insist on right and wrong, good and evil, as the one great distinction without which our life goes off into hopeless confusion and misery. It shows itself still more in the way in which they stand, as it were, on watchtowers, gazing far backward and far forward, teaching us to judge the little things close at hand by the light of God's great purposes, and never to allow the trifles of to-day, which look to us important now only because they are under our eyes, to make us forget the great eternal world to which we belong all the time. Lastly, the prophets lead us to see God and His kingdom in the future. By teaching us to fear and to hope, but above all to hope, beckoning us to look onward to the days which are still far before us, they lead our thoughts likewise to the heaven above us and to God the King of heaven. And again, by fixing our minds on Him and the treasures of wisdom and goodness which are hid in His counsels, they invite us to look beyond the little round of present things and

admit the coming ages among our beliefs and our desires.

These are some of the benefits which we may receive, if we will, more or less from all the prophets. They have likewise, as I told you, their different lessons, changing with the times for which they spoke and with the events of their own lives. The ups and downs of fortune which befel the Jewish people under its kings, then the carrying away into a strange land, and then the return of part of the people back to their own land, give rise to different bursts of prophecy. One particular thread of prophecy I noticed as having special interest for us by the way in which it prepares us for the New Testament. The hopes for the people take shape by degrees as hopes of a coming Deliverer. This expected Deliverer, who at last was known as the Christ or the Messiah, *i.e.* the Anointed One, was known better and better as time went on. In the sufferings of the captivity the prophets found out under the Spirit's teaching that *He* too must be a sufferer, one who shared all His people's sorrows and felt the burden of their sins as His own. But they were further taught to look beyond the time of suffering to the time of glory. The return of the people from the dust of captivity became an assurance that life is possible after death as well as before it. Thus those expectations were planted in the hearts of men which were fulfilled on the first Easter morning, when the true King of the Jews and of all mankind, who had passed through suffering and death down into the grave, rose once more from the dead, and

so led the way in the march of mankind back to God.

To-day we take a step backwards, not merely in the pages of our Bibles, but in the order of time. Parts of some of the books with which we have to do to-day may perhaps have been written as late as some of the later prophecies. But the names of David and Solomon belong in one sense or another to four out of these five books, and so we are carried back to those two great kings who stand at the beginning of the kingdom of the Jews, while it was yet in the first bloom of its power and glory. The names of the books which thus remain for us to consider are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Solomon's Song. On this last book I do not propose to say anything, for obvious reasons. A time may one day come when it will be understood why Solomon's Song has a place in our Bibles; but, as things now are, it can hardly be possible to speak of it from the pulpit with advantage.

We come first to the book of Job. This wonderful book hangs in the air, as it were, without mark of time and almost without mark of place. Job is set in the land of Uz, outside the land of Israel. He has no knowledge of tabernacle or temple or law or prophet; yet he has the faith of a Jew: he believes in the one Lord whom the Jews worshipped. There is nothing to fix at what time he is supposed to have lived. He is cut off from everything: he stands alone, alone facing God, and so his struggles are a true picture of the struggles which are likely to come to any man at any time in any place who is brought

into sore trials, and yet does not forget God. You will remember that we are now in a part of the Bible which has much more to do with words than with works. The story of Job is not like the story of David or of Elijah, such as we read in the earlier books: it is rather like one of the parables in the Gospels, such, for instance, as the parable of the rich man and the beggar. The doctrines of the book are the important part. All that is said to have happened to Job is only a framework put in to carry the doctrines.

What then are these doctrines? I have used the word 'doctrines' for want of a better, but it is not a very fit or satisfactory word here. The teaching of the book of Job comes out partly in questions, partly in answers to questions. We cannot pack the substance of the whole into a small space. The different parts are necessary to each other, even when they seem to contradict each other. Job, a man who is both prosperous and happy, enriched by God with every blessing that life can bring, yet not injured by his good fortune, but fearing God with all his heart, is stripped one by one of all his blessings. His cattle and his slaves, in those days the chief kind of riches, are carried off by robbers or struck dead by lightning. His sons and daughters are crushed to death beneath a falling house. In the midst of his poverty and desolation his own body is not spared: it is filled with a loathsome disease. His wife, instead of cheering him and encouraging him, mocks at him bitterly because he still trusts in God.

In the midst of his trouble three friends come to see him. They are full of real pity for him. Their

wish is to mourn with him and to comfort him. For a whole week they say nothing, but only sit down with him in sorrow. Then at last he breaks forth. He says nothing against God; but he wishes no longer to live since life has become so bitter, he feels it a curse to have been born. The friends reply with an appeal to the justice of God. They begin softly and kindly; but as he answers that their doctrines, however true they may be, do not heal his misery or show him the way out of his bewilderment, they wax hotter and hotter, and pour forth reproaches against him. The subject of the whole dispute is the meaning of sorrow and trouble and why God sends them. Probably every one in this church who is more than a child has at some time or other tried to see his way in the same difficulty. 'Do good, and thou shalt find good; do evil, and thou shalt find evil'; this is the first simple rough law. We express it more roughly still when we say that well-doing leads to happiness, and wrongdoing leads to misery. This is true, but it is not the whole truth. If it were the whole truth, we should never see any misfortune happening to a good man or any good fortune enjoyed by a wicked man. Yet we know that we do often see both these things; and so we may be sure we cannot have learned the whole of God's ways to man when we are satisfied to judge men solely by this rule. Yet this was what Job's friends did. They had their rule by heart, and had no scruple about applying it to the sufferer before them. Seeing him in misery, they thought that God must have sent the misery as a punishment for some

sins. They knew of no great sins to accuse him of but they declared that he *must* have committed great sins, or God would never have so afflicted him. And when Job refuses to confess the truth of their accusations, they grow more angry and pronounce him guilty of self-righteousness. •

And here let me point out one great mistake, which is commonly made by readers of the book of Job. It is often taken for granted that every word which we find there in every chapter is pure truth, no matter from whose lips it comes; and the speeches of the friends in particular are readily quoted, because they agree so well with what is supposed to be the religious and proper thing to say upon all occasions. But the fact is that even the truths which the friends utter become half-falsehoods in their mouths, and will be equally false in our mouths if we use them in the same reckless uncharitable way. Not the least useful lesson of the book of Job is that it is quite possible to be doing only the devil's work when we pride ourselves on being on the side of God and religion: there is a speaking for God, as Job bitterly complains, which is a wicked speaking, and a talking for Him which is a deceitful talking. On the other hand, Job's own words, honest and in the main true as they are, must still be taken as the words of a man in anguish who cannot see his way, and so is often led to speak wild words; who refuses to juggle himself into repeating what he cannot believe merely because he is told he ought to believe it; and yet who still feels that his own life and God's dealings with it are a terrible puzzle.

When at last God answers Job out of the whirlwind, he and his friends are alike put to silence. We are made to feel the folly and falsehood of pronouncing that the greatest sufferers must have been the greatest sinners (though indeed there ought to be little need of such teaching for Christians who have heard of the spotless Saviour's sufferings), and at the same time we are shown how little we poor short-sighted creatures can understand of the counsels of the mighty God. We are permitted to see at least one purpose of suffering. Job was tried and purified by what he endured. He came forth from his sorrows with a deeper and wiser faith in God than he had known before, and he received in the eyes of men the assurance of God's undiminished love and favour by being restored to more than his former good fortune. The sufferings which God sends are not a mark of His hatred or indifference: one reason at least why He sends them is to purify us and make us better and truer men.

The book of Psalms must be more familiar to us all than any other book of the Bible, from its use in church every Sunday. I have often had occasion to preach to you about different Psalms, and may have to do the same again. Still a few words will not be out of place now about the whole book. The Psalms taken altogether are often called the Psalms of David. It must not be supposed that they were all written by him. They come from all times between his days and those of the latest prophets. In the 137th Psalm, for instance, we have the sighs of the Jewish prisoners as they sat beside the waters of

Babylon and longed to be back in their own holy and beloved land. The mark of place and time which every one can observe in those words may be traced more faintly in some other Psalms. But David is *the* Psalmist. The fountain of devotion and praise to God which sprung forth with such power in his heart flowed on into the holy men of other generations who read and sang his eager words; and for many a generation the Psalter or book of Psalms went on growing richer and fuller. Almost every thought which can enter the mind of a man communing with his God is there. Sometimes the tone is of bitter anguish, sometimes of bounding joy, often a mixture of both; but always the one assurance is there, that God can and will be the help of them that trust in Him and cry to Him. Many of the Psalms are the outpourings of lonely men, pleading with God as Job pleaded with Him. Others again are thanksgivings written for the temple services, meant like our best hymns to be regularly used by bodies of singers in the public worship of the people, praises of the Lord by the great congregation. This great variety of the Psalms gives them no small part of their value. They reach us in every mood of our hearts, and turn every thought into a prayer.

No change can be greater than when we pass from the Psalms to the Proverbs. The burning words of the righteous king, who was a fighter for the greater part of his life, give place to the calm maxims of the wise king whose long reign was a time of peace and trade and riches. Here too, as in the Psalms, the proverbs which Solomon himself

uttered became the pattern after which many proverbs were fashioned, and the book of Proverbs, as we have it, is a storehouse of the wise sayings of different generations. Their *wise* sayings—this is the mark of the whole book. A time had come in the history of the Jews when they might at last rest: the struggle to obtain complete mastery within their own land was over: what they had to do now was to dwell in it after a right and godly manner. Up to this time they had been always on guard, a kind of soldier life was a necessity. Now they were to live the life of citizens, to dwell with each other in a peaceable and orderly way, and throw into common duties the whole strength which till now had been in part required for defence against enemies. Simple homely morality had to be cultivated by old and young, rich and poor, parents and children, husbands and wives: and the great need of all minds was summed up in one word, 'wisdom.' The natural impulse of every one was, as it is now, to go off after this or that object of desire in shortsighted and reckless ways. Wisdom corrects this impulse by teaching us to fix our minds on lasting and distant things, so as not to be carried away by deceitful shows. Sometimes in the book of Proverbs the wisdom which teaches us seems to lose sight of God in the petty matters of our daily work. But it is a most needful lesson that the Bible declares these common things, which we are apt to pursue without thought of God, are the very field of our religion, and that in them we have to show whether we do indeed worship a holy and just God who will have us holy

and just like Himself. For again and again we are reminded that all lesser wisdoms meet together in one highest victorious wisdom, the beginning of which is the fear of the Lord.

Lastly, we come to the book of Ecclesiastes. It is put into the mouth of a king of Jerusalem, a son of David, *i.e.* Solomon. The writer of the book had no care to thrust himself forward. All that he had to say appeared to suit the character of the wise king, such as he might have become in his old age, after the ample experience of a long life upon the throne. It was a melancholy message that he had to deliver as what life had taught him. Job had been perplexed with misery; the preacher was perplexed with a less sharp but a commoner and perhaps even a more depressing thing, with *vanity*, disappointment, failure. To him life had promised much and seemed to perform little: it brought only vexation of spirit. Out of such an experience what lesson could spring? This, a humble lesson, yet a true and wise one. First, not to lose the blessings of the present by wasting ourselves in empty expectation of better things in store; but to prize what we have, and take heed that we do not throw away the true riches which lie hid within it. Next, to remember God, our Maker and our Judge, now at once, not by and bye but to-day, and find in Him and His law a refuge against the unsatisfyingness of all things beside. There are certain states of mind only too familiar to many among us in which our hearts can be better reached by such a message as this than by any other voice from above. But God forbid

that we should rest in such states of mind. We have come to the end of the Old Testament; but there is a New Testament waiting for us. God Himself leads us through the wilderness, makes us feel the world to be barren and dry, writes vanity of vanities upon our hopes and desires. But this He does that He may lead us at last into the heavenly Land of Promise, when we have learned that all life flows from Him, and then new life and brightness return to the things which only wearied us before. His Son's resurrection is the true answer to that sigh of vanity. It calls us, brethren, to walk in newness of life. It tells us that all things are ours, and we are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

IX

THE GOSPELS

"THE beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God."—*St. Mark* i. 1.

WE have now gone through the Old Testament and can understand in what sense, as the Epistle to the Hebrews told us, God at sundry times and in divers manners spoke to the fathers by the prophets. We have followed the Jewish people through manifold and great changes from their first beginnings in Abraham the Friend of God. We have seen how the Providence of God led them down into Egypt; how after 400 years, ending in cruel slavery, they were delivered by God by the hand of Moses; how they went forth, led by Moses the prophet and mouthpiece of God, and journeyed through the wilderness towards their own land; how they received from God through Moses at Mount Sinai a Holy Law, which was to restrain them and guide them in the right way, and make them a people indeed; how, because of their rebellious spirit, they

had to wander forty years in the wilderness, and at last entered into the Promised Land under the guidance, not of Moses, but of Joshua ; how they were permitted to conquer the heathen nations whom they found in the land, and take possession of their cities ; how for many years of rough disorder they were governed from time to time only by rulers called judges, who led them against their enemies, and enforced some kind of justice amongst themselves ; how the last of these judges, Samuel, was set apart to God while yet a little child, and became a prophet as well as a judge, teaching the people from God as well as ruling them from God ; how he brought all the different parts of the people together, so that they learned to feel once more that they were truly one people, and began to crave for one king ; how this natural desire of theirs was mixed with want of faith in their unseen and heavenly King, and so Samuel was permitted to anoint first the tall warrior Sàul, the king after their own heart ; but then, when he only led them deeper into misfortune, another king was set over them, David the shepherd, the king after God's own heart, the faithful and righteous, though unhappily not the spotless, king ; how after him came his son Solomon, the wise king, who built the temple of the Lord, and carried the power and honour of Israel higher and wider than it has ever reached before or since ; how after the glorious reigns of these two great kings, David and Solomon, there followed a dreadful division, when the one people of God was split into the two separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and Israel soon gave itself up to

the worship of idols. We saw how, after some generations, both kingdoms came to an end through conquering armies of foreigners, who carried first the people of Israel and then the people of Judah away into strange lands; how for all this the spirit of Judah was not broken, and the true people of God yet lived in the midst of captivity; how, when a favourable time came, they returned to their own land under the guidance of Ezra, built up the holy city and the temple of the Lord, and lived on without kings and without idols till the time of Christ.

In all this long and varied story we have seen the unfolding of God's counsels; the way in which He made preparation for yet greater events than any of these. Every step was a lesson about Himself and His dealings with men. The Friend of man; the God of a family, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the Deliverer from darkness and slavery; the Giver of a Holy Law; a jealous Ruler who will not suffer His laws to be broken, but takes vengeance on them that hate Him, yet rejoices to receive them back into favour; the Captain and Guide of His people in their wanderings and their fightings; the Judge and King of His people in their dealings with each other; the Giver of wisdom to them that need it; the Restorer from captivity and from death; the Holy One who delights in the praise and prayer of a worshipping people;—here we have the chief characters under which God has declared Himself for evermore to men in and through the story of the Jewish people.

Once more, in the latter part of the Old Testament, we have found Him speaking yet more

expressly and distinctly through the prophets. We have seen how they were raised up by Him to speak His words to His sinful or sorrowing people; to open their hearts to every thought and feeling of their brethren on the one hand, and to His own heavenly messages on the other; how they taught the people to look backwards and forwards, but chiefly forwards; to regard their own little doings as only a part of God's mighty plans, plans which, because God is good, must also be good likewise, and bring only evil to those who set themselves against good; how, in a word, they laboured in a thousand different ways to lift men out of their sin and misery by the mighty power of faith and of hope. Lastly, the other books of the Old Testament, which teach us more by words than by works, have shown us, in Job the bitter struggles of a sorely tried man to find out the meaning of God's afflictions, and the answer which God makes; in the Psalms the prayers and praises of many generations of lonely men or full congregations, beginning with the outpourings of David's own heart; in the Proverbs the maxims which are needed for a wise and right conduct of life, all leading down from and up to the fear of God; and in Ecclesiastes the needful lesson that God is to be found in the present as well as the past and the future, and that He is the one refuge against the weary sense of vanity and emptiness which is so apt to befall us in middle life.

To-day, in beginning the New Testament, we enter on a new world, and yet one which is the close and completion of the old world that has engaged us

for many weeks. Its character is expressed very clearly in those words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which I have so often quoted, "God hath spoken unto us by His Son." All through the New Testament the voice of God comes to us through the person of Jesus Christ. It is not that we have in Him a new God, in place of the old God whom the Jews worshipped. Our God is the same as theirs, but He makes Himself known to us in new ways; He bids us look on His Son, and through Him learn His own character.

The New Testament, like the Old, may be divided into two parts, the first made up of stories, God teaching chiefly by works; the second made up of letters and prophecies, God teaching chiefly by words. The Gospels and Acts of the Apostles form one part, the Epistles and the Revelation of St. John form the other. To-day I propose to speak only of the Gospels.

The very name at once calls for our attention. We all believe that we possess something called the gospel; we all by this time, I hope, know that the word means the Good News. In a certain way the name gospel has come to belong to the Christian faith in general, or to what are supposed to be its most important doctrines in particular. Now we may naturally ask, what has that meaning to do with the four first books of the New Testament? how can four stories be spoken of as if they were the same thing as a set of doctrines? The truth is, brethren, that the name belongs first and properly to the books; and the doctrines have only a lesser and

imperfect right to it. Strictly speaking, the earliest and simplest gospel was the message which Christ *Himself declared and bid His apostles declare, that the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven was at hand*; and it would be hard to find better words to express for us the pith of all the Gospels. All in their several ways, by everything which they tell us of Christ's doings and His sayings, point us to Him, and say to us, 'Look there, look on Jesus the Son of God and the Son of man, and see in Him the kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven brought near at hand. You are accustomed to think of God as far off in a distant world: you are accustomed to think of heaven as a distant place to be reached in some remote time, not before your earthly course is ended, perhaps not for ages afterwards. But you are wrong: look at Christ, and you will see that you are wrong. In Him God and heaven are brought very close to you, and you find yourselves already citizens of a real powerful kingdom, when you understand how He lived the life of God and of heaven upon earth.'

For us then the true gospel is simply the life of Christ. We may, without impropriety, give the name gospel to any great truths which are established by His life; but His life itself is the pure, simple, original gospel. In speaking of His life I, of course, do not mean to leave out His death and resurrection: they are the most important and instructive parts of His whole earthly existence: to St. Paul they alone were sufficient to form a gospel. But I mean by the life of Christ all that is told of Him in these four books: how He was born, and grew up to manhood, and

taught and wrought miracles, and suffered, died, and was buried, and rose again from the dead. There are a great many sayings and discourses of Christ set down in the Bible. They are of course full of truth most necessary for our use: the words of Him that spake as never man spake should be treasured up by us and studied as words of life. But it would be a great mistake to suppose that they are themselves the gospel, or make even the more important part of the gospel. It is hardly too much to say that the sayings of Christ are nothing without His doings. Certainly we cannot rightly understand His sayings unless we study His doings: The sayings and the doings each help us to understand the other. Both alike are fruits of His nature and character and work, which are themselves the very gospel in the truest sense.

This is indeed a happy thought for those who do desire to take hold of God's holy gospel, but feel that they have not time or knowledge or understanding enough for the study of difficult doctrines. The gospel of gospels itself is, for all that, within their reach. They can read and see for themselves what Christ *was*; and that is *the* Good News. The picture which rises up before them as they read is a truer and better thing than any doctrines which can be reached by mere thinking. We must all have felt that a knowledge of the person and character of some one whom we had reason to admire had really greater power both to instruct us and to kindle us to a worthy life than any lessons of a preacher or a book. So too it is

with Christ. The power of the gospel is the power of the image of Christ Himself, in His divine yet most human goodness, to turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh and wake up a new life in dead spirits.

Properly then there is but one gospel, as there is but one Lord and Saviour. What we call the four Gospels are merely the one gospel seen from different sides and set in different lights. It is only in rapid and familiar speaking that we talk of the Gospel of St. Matthew. The more exact name is the Gospel according to St. Matthew; *i.e.* the gospel, the one gospel, in that particular shape in which it was understood and described by St. Matthew. So, when we speak of the four Gospels, this is really only for convenience of language: what we mean is the four books in which the one gospel is variously described.

There are various advantages in having Christ's life thus presented to us in four different ways. Not the least advantage is that we are thus led away from the mere books to the contents of the books. If there were only one story of Christ's life, we might be easily led into seeking in the book for a kind of benefit that no mere book can ever give. But now we see that the four books are only like different cases or vessels which contain the one precious jewel; and we are led to see that the one important thing for us is to know what Christ Himself was. Again, it is a great advantage to have the one life seen from different sides. It comes out clearer and, as we say, more lifelike, when we are

able to look at it in this way. There was some one particular character in Christ's nature or work which had the chief interest for each of the four writers. St. Matthew saw in Christ the king who fulfilled the hopes of the prophets and those humble Jews of later times who were taught by the books of the prophets. St. Mark saw in Him a true Son of God, one whose words and works were always true signs of God and God's kingdom. St. Luke saw in Him the fulfilment of the hopes of all nations, the sign that all mankind were now admitted to be true members of God's people. St. John saw in Him the eternal link between God and man, the light and life of men, the one perfect representation of God upon earth. Hence there are various sayings and doings of Christ which it did not concern one or the other evangelist to mention; and even when they tell the same tale, they tell it in different ways, drawing our attention to different points. The impression which we thus gain by reading all the four books is thus much fuller and richer than we could form in any other manner. Above all, we are led to discover that there is in truth no possibility of ever exhausting or coming to the end of the gospel of Christ. Whenever we approach it from new points of view, it sends forth new light. Its outer form contains within it endless riches of meaning which reward those who seek them patiently and humbly. The gospel which is so simple is also in another sense beyond all comparison manifold. There is no dark place in our own hearts or in the great bewildering world without us which may not

find a light upon it from something in that marvellous fourfold tale of Jesus of Nazareth.

But we must not forget what I said long ago, that both the Old and the New Testaments were written by Jews for Jews, and that the teaching of both is wrapped up in what befel the Jewish people. It would be a great mistake to imagine that we have done with the Jews because we have come into the more familiar world of Christ and His apostles. Do not suppose that you will ever understand much of what the gospel is meant to teach you if you put the Jews out of sight. Mark the very first words of the New Testament, "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham." Abraham and David are with us still; they hang on to the skirts of our Blessed Lord; we cannot properly have Him if we neglect them. The title over His cross declared Him to be King of the Jews. We should have made a very different Christ from the Christ of the Bible, if we set to work to represent Him only as our own personal Saviour, and to pass over all that He was to the ancient people of God.

The life of the Jews as a people dwelling in their own land was drawing near its end when He was born. They had been wonderfully brought out of Egypt to the Land of Promise in the old old time. After many generations God had suffered them for their sins to be led away into captivity. Then once more He had brought them out with a yet more marvellous deliverance, and restored life to the dry and scattered bones. But a deeper and more deadly corruption stole over them. Once upon a time they

had worshipped false gods: now they worshipped the One True God in an unbelieving and godless spirit. The very heart of religion itself was diseased: it bore no fruit of love and service to God or man. Then, as we are taught in some of the parables, the Heavenly King sent as a last messenger His only begotten Son. But they hated Him and said, "We will not have this man to reign over us." They had lost the power of discerning the image of God when it came in its own natural beauty without the blaze of glory or the sound of trumpets. Unlike the later prophets they could not recognize a king who was also a man of sorrows, or a prophet who refused to astonish them with signs, and spoke and did only that which the work before Him required. Thus, as St. John says, "He came to his own, and his own received him not."

But the life of Christ was the first day of a new world, as well as almost the last day of an old world. Outside the Jews stood other peoples less highly favoured by God, yet now become more worthy to be owned by Him. Christ's death and resurrection at last broke down the barrier. As St. Paul says, "Now in Christ Jesus we who some time were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ." In the Gospels we have beginnings of this mighty change. To understand them rightly we must keep the recollection of Jew and Gentile constantly before our minds. We may, if we choose, treat it as a barren matter of knowledge, a thing which has nothing to do with ourselves or our own life. But, if we let the Bible itself teach us, those words Jew and Gentile

will lead us into the midst of the most awful and solemn thoughts which the mind of man can reach, the thoughts of a gospel refused on the one hand, accepted on the other. But high above all these differences stands the one Divine form of the Son of man, speaking as He spoke in the last days of His sojourn among mankind, "All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth." That was the reward of His perfect obedience and sacrifice: that is the word of hope with which He cheers us on to tread in His blessed footsteps.

X

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

"AND the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb."—*Revelation* xxi. 14.

WE began last Sunday to consider the New Testament. We saw its great mark to be this, that in it God speaks to us in His Son, thus putting the crown and finish to all that through long ages and in different ways He had spoken before. His speaking in the times of old had been about Himself and His kingdom, about men and the world only so far as they have to do with Him. It is the same still in the New Testament. Here too we are not taught to worship a new God, but the God of Abraham and Moses and David is made known to us more perfectly in the person of His Son.

We saw that the New Testament, like the Old, may be divided into the books which chiefly teach us by works, and the books which chiefly teach us by words; into stories of things that happened, and direct teaching by lessons; the Gospels and the Acts

of the Apostles making up the first part, and the Epistles and Revelation of St. John the second part : just as in the Old Testament we have first the long history from Genesis to Esther, and then Job, Psalms and the rest, and the books of the Prophets.

Our proper subject last Sunday was the Gospels, which are in truth the very heart of the New Testament, from which all the other books draw their life and power. I pointed out that these books tell us what the gospel really is,—not all the doctrines that we believe, still less a few chosen doctrines, but the simple message of good news that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, is close at hand, brought near to us in the life and death and rising again of Christ. The words of Christ are not by themselves the gospel, even the deeds of Christ are not by themselves the gospel ; but the picture which His words and deeds, and especially His deeds, give of Him and of God's dealings with Him, this is the gospel. This one gospel, as we saw, is presented to us in four books, the Gospel *according to* St. Matthew, *i.e.* as understood and described by St. Matthew, the Gospel *according to* St. Mark, and the rest. Thus we are taught to look on through each of the four books at Him who is the one subject of them all, and we are enabled to see Him, as it were, from different sides and in different lights.

We go on to-day to the book called the Acts of the Apostles. The question at once arises, Why should we want to hear about the apostles? When we have had the words and deeds of the Master, we are inclined to think little of the words and deeds of the

servants. If God has spoken to us once for all in His Son, can we go further? Is it possible to have anything in the Bible after the Gospels which it is worth our while to hear? We must face these questions, brethren; if we want to understand the Acts of the Apostles and their use for us. I do not think that we half value the Gospels as we should do, or half understand how completely they rise above all the rest of the New Testament. But the truth is, the better we know their surpassing dignity and value, the more able shall we be to appreciate the excellence of the other books of the New Testament. If the Gospels were more highly prized, the Acts of the Apostles would not be so little read, or so little cared for as they are now.

There are two great purposes served by all the books of the New Testament which follow the Gospels. First, they are in their several ways a Divine explanation of the Gospels; they teach us what we ought to think of Christ, and of the light which He throws on God and God's kingdom. Secondly, they carry us gently onwards from the ascension of Christ into the common life of men. The gospel was not flung suddenly and nakedly into the midst of the world. Christ appointed apostles to carry on the work which He had begun, and through them He founded the Church, which was to carry on the same work when they were dead. We want for our guidance to know not only what Christ was, but what changes His coming began to make in the world. We are too much accustomed to think of Him as a long way off from us: we should find Him far nearer if we

approached Him through His apostles and through His Church.

The teaching which we receive through the apostles is threefold. In the Acts we have the teaching of their lives, what they did and what God did with them. In the Epistles we have the letters which they wrote to Churches or to single persons. In the Revelation of St. John we have the visions of prophecy which were vouchsafed to one of them. The book of their Acts, with which we are concerned to-day, manifestly carries on the story of the Gospels. It was written by St. Luke, the author of the third Gospel, and at the beginning he refers back to his earlier book. "The former treatise (*i.e.* writing) have I made," he says, "of all things that Jesus began both to do and to teach." In his Gospel he had written down the first part of what he had to say, the doings and teachings of Jesus on earth. Now he was about to tell what happened after Jesus had ascended into heaven.

We must not however suppose that he has any intention of putting before us all the acts of all the apostles. None of the Gospel writers made any such attempt as to our Lord Himself. What St. John distinctly says, "Many other signs truly did Jesus which are not written in this book," must be borne in mind for all the Gospels. Those things which are told us about Christ are the things which it was most important for us to know, the things which were the best signs and marks to explain the whole of Christ's life. So is it in the Acts. First, we have nothing but the names of three or four apostles.

The rest of the apostles probably lived courageous and devoted lives, each doing his own work in his own portion of the world and helping forward Christ's kingdom. But it was not necessary for us to know what each did. So many different accounts of different apostles would only have puzzled us, and drawn away our attention from the work which God was bringing to pass through one and all. Nor again was it necessary for us to know all that befel even the chief apostles. Even they were less to be remembered than the counsels of God which were wrought out through them. It was enough for us to learn the great steps through which the kingdom of God advanced and a new Christian order of things grew up in the midst of the old worn-out order of the world.

I reminded you last Sunday that, wherever we are reading in the Bible, in the New Testament as well as in the Old, we are always in the presence of the Jews, and must keep them before our minds in order to see what the Bible means. We saw how our Lord Himself was a Jew, and how the burden of St. John's complaint is His rejection by His own people: "He came unto his own and his own received him not." Our Lord's whole manhood was spent in the Holy Land. He was crucified at Jerusalem as King of the Jews; and, when He ascended up into heaven, the Jews, in spite of all their sins, and this last the blackest of all, were still the people of God, and there was no sign of any change in God's counsels towards them. In a few years this state of things was over: the Holy City was trampled under foot by the

heathen Romans, and God's only peculiar people on earth were the despised and persecuted Christians in all lands. That great crash however does not come within the New Testament. We have prophecies of it, but we have no account of it by any writer of the Bible. Yet the book of the Acts from the first chapter to the last shows us the preparation which God was making for the approaching change. The people of God was not to be scattered and cast out till the Church of God was ready to take its place.

It will help you, I think, to understand better the Acts of the Apostles, if you will observe in it four different parts. Few here probably know it well enough to be able at once to follow exactly what I am saying; and indeed I fear altogether that most of our subject for to-day will be found less easily understood and less interesting than the parts of the Bible which we have examined in former weeks. Still it would be a great loss to pass over the Acts, and if you will read the book over afterwards at home in your own Bibles with a little care, I think you will be able to make out the principal points. As I said just now then, there are four steps in the Acts, and they all mark the advances made by the Church in taking its place as not only the true bearer of Christ's image upon earth, but also the true wearer of the old glories given to Israel before Christ came.

The first part is from the beginning to the middle of the sixth chapter. It is the story of the birth and establishing of the Church in its first home at Jerusalem in the very midst of the Jews. The second part ends nearly with the twelfth chapter. It is the

story of the spread of the Church from Judea to Antioch by apostles belonging to the number of the Twelve who had been with Christ in His lifetime. The third part reaches to the twentieth verse of the nineteenth chapter. It is the story of St. Paul's travels as a missionary to preach the gospel in distant lands. The fourth part is the story of St. Paul's last journey back to Jerusalem, the attempt of the Jews to kill him there, as they had killed his Master; his leaving of Jerusalem for ever and journey to Rome, the chief city of the heathen world.

Let us now endeavour shortly to notice a few of the leading events in the story, especially such as help us to understand better the purpose of the whole Bible. The beginning of the whole is our Lord's ascension, which we celebrate in the service of Thursday next. Though He had returned from the grave unconquered and unharmed, He did not mean to live any longer on earth either in the suffering and shame which had gone before His death or in the glory of His Father. The work for the sake of which He had been made man was done. It was time for Him to return to His Father, and leave to His faithful disciples the task of spreading the glad tidings among men. They were still the old glad tidings, the news of the kingdom of heaven. His instructions to the apostles, St. Luke tells us, were of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. But the glad tidings were now clothed in a new and mighty form. To tell of *Him* was the privilege of those who preached them: "Ye shall be witnesses unto *me*" were His words. The witness was to be borne first

in Judea and Jerusalem, but then far and wide, even to the uttermost part of the earth. Above all, they were to look for a new presence from heaven to take the place of that presence of His which they were losing. The Holy Ghost, of whom He had spoken before His death, was to come upon them and clothe them with power from on high. When this charge had been given, the Lord disappeared among the clouds, and the apostles were left alone. Their first care was to complete their number, according to the twelve tribes of Israel, by choosing one to take the place of the wretched traitor Judas. Then they waited in patience for the coming of the Holy Ghost.

On the holy fiftieth day, what we now call Whitsunday, He came with signs of power. They spoke no longer in the one sacred language of the Jews, but in the many languages of the Gentiles. In the old time it had been thought that only those who belonged to the same country could be joined together; but here the new faith of Christ was seen binding together men from all nations. As I told you last year, that day was the birthday of the Church. The kingdom which God now claimed over man was a kingdom of the Spirit, ruling over men's inward hearts, and its great mark was its breaking down every barrier which kept men at variance with each other.

In the next few chapters we have various marks of the outward progress which the Church made, ending with the appointment of deacons to relieve the apostles from some of the increasing work thus laid upon them, and the conversion of many Jews to

the faith of Christ. Then the second division begins with the trial of Stephen, one of these deacons, by the unbelieving Jews, and the shedding of the first Christian blood by his stoning to death. The persecution which followed scattered the infant Church of Jerusalem; and so the efforts made by the enemies of the gospel to destroy it only caused it to be carried into fresh places. At this time the Church gained one convert whose marvellous words and works were soon to surpass those of all the original apostles. St. Paul was a narrow-minded Jew who had taken part in the murder of Stephen, and who delighted to show his zeal for the Jews by vigorous persecution of the Christians. Yet, while he was breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, he was checked on a journey by a blinding light from heaven and a voice which said, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" and that day was the beginning of a new life for him, and through him for us and all distant nations beside. During all this early part of the Acts St. Peter is the true head of the apostles. By him the Church was built up. Foremost in our Lord's lifetime he was also foremost in these days of trial and persecution, and his love and zeal were no doubt among the chief powers which held the infant Church together. But with the third division of the Acts a new state of things begins. That St. Paul, who had been the fiercest of Jews, was now anxious to bring all nations within the true Divine fold. He could not rest without spreading to distant nations the glad tidings which had melted his own heart. So next follow

his travels in different lands. His usual plan was first to address himself to the Jews, and form out of them the beginnings of a fresh Church; and, only when they rejected him, did he turn to the Gentiles. Wherever he went, he did not roughly attack the old beliefs that he found, but endeavoured to use them as stepping stones to a purer and fuller faith, carrying out his Master's principle of not destroying but fulfilling. After various journeys to and fro among lesser places he resolved to go back to Jerusalem and thence on to Rome. He felt it to be a dangerous visit, and he was warned by the way not to persevere, but his decision was made, and once more he cast in his lot with his own dearly loved people. But they valued the knowledge of God and of the kingdom of God only as a pride and privilege to themselves: they felt nothing but indignation at other men being made to share their blessings, and so they bitterly hated the man who was filling the earth with the name of Christ. Christ Himself had been accused of insulting the holy temple; Stephen had been put to death for the same reason, and for his refusal to believe that God's favour was to be tied for ever to a stiffnecked and rebellious people; and now it was the turn for the persecutor of Stephen to have a plot formed against his life on the same accusation. He found protection against his own countrymen in the justice of the heathen Romans; and after a long delay was taken to Rome to plead his cause, being shipwrecked by the way, and showing then how one, whose heart was filled with the loftiest thoughts of the advancement of God's kingdom, was still the

calmest and wisest in the hour of outward danger. At Rome the Jews finally cast him off, and so by no act of his own he found himself and the Church of Christ thrown upon the wide world, no longer permitted to worship God at Jerusalem, but finding His presence everywhere. *

These are the main outlines of the story of the Acts.* But there is one feature which appears again and again, to which I desire to call your attention on this the last Sunday after Easter. The resurrection of Christ, which is the end of the gospel, is the foundation of the whole faith of the apostles. To be witnesses of His resurrection, to declare that they had once more had among them Him who had been laid in the grave, was their first and most necessary work. That experience had changed for themselves the whole appearance of life: by making it known to others they believed that they could change the whole face of the world. And it was a well-founded belief. * Though all the great ones of the earth were gathered together against God's Holy Child Jesus, they knew that the Lord of hosts was on His side and on their side. Out of that wretched decaying old world a new world was fashioned by the power of faith in Christ dying and rising from the dead.

And, if we ask how that wonder-working faith was kept alive, again the Acts of the Apostles give us the answer. They point to the Holy Ghost, and the work of the Holy Ghost, in building up a Holy Catholic Church. The apostles were able to believe in an ever present, ever living Christ, the true image of the everlasting God, because they believed

in a Spirit of truth and love who dwelt in their own hearts and taught them to cleave to one another as members of the same body. "The multitude of them that believed," says St. Luke, "were of one heart and of one soul." Thus in His Church God set before us one more image of Himself and His kingdom. He taught us to find in charity and peace and mutual help the true entrance into His own life, which is also the life of heaven. •

XI

THE EPISTLES

“THESE things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly. But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”—1 *Timothy* iii. 14, 15.

THE Word of God through the apostles,—that is the subject which occupied us last Sunday, and which will occupy us to-day and for one Sunday more. We heard long ago how in the New Testament God speaks to us through His Son. He speaks to us through His Son in all parts of the New Testament from the first word to the last. In the first four books, which are called the four Gospels, Jesus Christ is set before us Himself simply and clearly. That is *the* gospel, the good news of God and God's kingdom brought near to man. The Son of God stands there before our eyes working and speaking, suffering, dying, and raised from the dead by His Father's might. His own words, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father,” show how the Gospels may be to us as a window through which we may look into

heaven. The other books of the New Testament also speak to us from God through His Son, but in a different way. As in the Gospels we see Christ, so in the books of the apostles we learn to understand the meaning of what we have seen. We ought to be always carrying our eyes back to the original picture: no explanations can take the place of that. But it is a great help to us to know what those men thought and felt who had lived in daily converse with the Divine Master, and what sort of things they did on the strength of their belief.

Last Sunday we had before us the book of the Acts of the Apostles. There the story of our Lord is followed up by the story of the faithful followers whom He chose to carry on His work after He had ascended into heaven. As in the Gospels we have only chosen words and works of our Lord, viz., those best adapted to give us a true notion of Himself and of God's kingdom; so here we have only chosen words and works of the apostles, viz., those which best show us how their knowledge of Christ enabled them to begin to conquer the world.

But we saw also that the book of the Acts is very much more than a collection of the doings of single men. These men were at once the rulers and the servants of the Church, and the story which we here read is, above all things, the story of the beginnings of the Church. When Christ went away, He did not leave any one man to take His place; but He left a body of men, a brotherhood of men, to take His place, and that body or

brotherhood we call the Church, the outward mark and framework of the unseen kingdom of God. Therefore the book of the Acts begins with that great event which some of us met here last Thursday to celebrate the mounting up of our Lord Himself into heaven, *i.e.* the end of His earthly life, the outward sign of His return to the Father. And the second chapter begins with the event which we shall celebrate next Sunday—the pouring forth of the Holy Ghost from heaven upon the little flock of Christians, breaking down the barriers which kept them strangers to each other, making them of one heart and of one mind; in a word, declaring them to be the Church of the living God.

Thus the Church was born. We saw further in the different parts of the Acts the steps by which it grew into independence. At each step Jew and Gentile stood before our eyes in rapidly changing positions. In the first part, up to the middle of the sixth chapter, we had the early establishing of the Church, with different tasks for different members, but one common purpose, in the midst of God's old people at Jerusalem. Then came the death of Stephen and the persecution which followed, scattering the leaders of the Church to other places, and causing it to be planted in a new home, Antioch. Then comes a great change. One of the fiercest persecutors of Christians, a young man who looked on with cruel joy at the murder of Stephen, was himself changed in heart, and led to take his place among the suffering few instead of

the tyrannical many. This young man, whom we now call St. Paul, felt himself called upon to travel about the world preaching the good news which had come so wonderfully home to himself. Wherever he went, he began by preaching to the Jews, but if they refused to hear, he turned to the Gentiles; and so the Church began to draw to itself members out of different lands and peoples. These missionary journeys of St. Paul fill the third part of the Acts, from the thirteenth to the middle of the nineteenth chapter. The fourth and last part of the Acts carries us on a step further. St. Paul goes up once more to Jerusalem to his own people, dear to him in spite of all their sins; but is rejected by them just because they grudged the knowledge of God to other people, and therefore hated the man who was spending his life in spreading it. He escapes death only by appealing to the justice of the heathen Romans, and his appeal carries him away for ever from Jerusalem to Rome, the great city of the heathen world. Thus, at the end of the book, the Church of God, in the person of its foremost apostle, is cut loose from the ancient people of God. It has no longer one single home: its home is throughout the world: and we too, strangers though we be, may claim the God of Israel as our own.

Another important lesson is taught us by this book, and indeed by all the later books of the New Testament. Every reader of the Bible, who thinks about what he reads, must often be struck with one great difference between those old times, and what

he sees around him now. In the Bible God appears as mixed up with the affairs of men, acting among men, speaking among men, in a way of which we have no present experience. We hear the wind and the thunder, and the songs of birds, and the voices of each other. We see the sky and the earth and all the living things that grow or move upon the earth, our brother men and all their works and ways. But God Himself is hidden behind a veil. When the heart is blind to His presence, neither the eye nor the ear can avail to make Him known. Yet, as I said before, God was brought nearer to man in Christ than He had ever been before; and it would be a strange result indeed of His coming if we were henceforth to be farther off from God. But no. From the day that the Son of God appeared among us as the Son of Man, the presence of God has been making itself known most of all in the heart and mind of man. He who refused to astonish the crowd into belief by a sign from heaven, was in effect teaching that our inward spirits can take truer hold of God than our outward senses. "The kingdom of God," He said, "is within you." The Holy Spirit, whom He promised to send in His own place, is not a voice outside our ears, but a power from above, strengthening and enlightening our own powers. And this we see most clearly in the books of the apostles. When they had need to know what to believe or what to do, no trumpet spoke to them out of heaven, but they prayed for the help and guidance of the Holy Ghost. They used at the same time

their best endeavours to find out what was right and true, and in the endeavour they found what they sought. The counsels and the doctrines which they thus discovered for themselves, with the help of the Holy Spirit within them, are written down for our benefit. We find there the truths of the Gospel used and applied to the common purposes of life, and endless instruction supplied by this means to ourselves. But we find also an example set us of the way in which we too may find God within us, and open our hearts to His enlightening Spirit.

We come now to the second division of those books of the New Testament which deal with the apostles, and with Christ only through the apostles. The name given to this part of the New Testament is the Epistles, *i.e.* the letters. They are not letters about trifling and indifferent matters. If they had been, they would not have been kept as part of the Bible. But it needs no pains to discover that, for instance, the Epistle to Philemon is exactly what we mean by a letter; and even the longest Epistles may be seen to be real letters, if we read them carefully. Three of them are addressed to private persons; three more to men who were entrusted with the government of churches; and the rest either to the whole church in some one place, or to different churches scattered about the world. The churches were many, the apostles were few: yet when they were absent, their advice and guidance under difficult circumstances were sometimes asked by letter; and then they freely wrote back their mind. Sometimes the news which they heard of what was going on

at a distance stirred them up to write and send messages of warning and encouragement. And again sometimes the dangers which assailed the Church were so widely spread that no single congregation or set of congregations required counsel more than the rest, and then they sent a circular letter to be passed on from church to church.

Much of what I said to you about the words of the prophets in the Old Testament is equally true of the letters of the Apostles. They were written by men who had a keen and lively fellow-feeling with the brethren to whom they were writing, men who believed themselves to be engaged in the same struggle of life or death, and whose sole desire was to make others partakers in the gifts which they knew God to have bestowed on them selves. What they wrote was not a set of general preachings which did not refer to any one state of things in particular: it was always suggested by what was at that moment of most pressing interest for those to whom it was written. At the same time they never wrote mere orders, "Do this," or "Avoid that": they always spoke to the reason and conscience by means of great and wide truths which are true at all times and under all circumstances. Lastly, on the one hand they spoke in the name of God and His Son Jesus: they strove first to kindle or keep alive the love and fear of Him as the foundation of all true knowledge and all right doing. On the other hand they taught that the proof of true godliness lies in the simple duties of life, and that they are the best Christians who are the best husbands and wives, and best parents and

children, and best masters and servants. But in joining together the service of God and the service of men they had one new doctrine to insist on, of which the prophets had only a faint dream. They could say boldly, "We are every one members one of another," and on that ground call on every man to study the good of his neighbour. They could do this because Christ had set the example, and because the very existence of the Church of Christ was without meaning, if this were supposed to be a thing with which religion had no concern.

Of the twenty-one Epistles preserved in the New Testament fourteen proceed from St. Paul, while the other seven, which are called Catholic or General Epistles, bear the names of four other apostles. In St. Paul's writings one word stands out above all others, 'faith.' He fought all his battles in that name. He saw around him dangers of various kinds assailing the Church, all because faith was put aside, and so he was never tired of showing his readers that the want of faith, of trust in the Lord God, who had been revealed in Jesus Christ dying and rising from the dead, was the most deadly of all wants. His words have often been misunderstood and used in ways which he would have wholly disapproved. But they will stand fast to the end of time, warning mankind against trusting to the notion that they can buy God's favour by outward works and against crouching before God as a hard Master, instead of trustfully leaning upon Him as one whose delight is to save and to deliver from death.

I can but shortly notice the chief subjects of

St. Paul's different Epistles. In the two Epistles to the Thessalonians, which were the earliest written of all, he chiefly teaches his readers in what spirit to look for the coming of the Lord, calmly and soberly doing their appointed work. In the Epistles to the Romans and Galatians we see him upholding the freedom of the Gospel against those Jewish Christians who wished to bind men for ever with the fetters of the old law. The Epistle to the Romans is at the same time the fullest declaration of doctrine about the purposes of God which we find anywhere in St. Paul's writings. The First Epistle to the Corinthians deals with a number of questions which were disturbing the Church, and points out how far a spirit of charity, of seeking the general good, would go towards showing a way out of difficulties. In the Second Epistle to the Corinthians more than any other Epistle we have a picture of St. Paul himself, affectionately pleading with his converts, and drawing out their attachment to him by the depth and power of his own feelings. In Philippians we have glad-hearted encouragements to converts for whom he could only wish that they might go on more and more as they had begun. The Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians were written later, when St. Paul was a prisoner at Rome. In them he rises to loftier and more wonderful heights than before, as he looks upon the plans of God for the whole world fulfilled in Christ, the head of men and the head of the world, the middle point in which earth and heaven meet, the life of the Church which is His body. Yet later still are what

are called the Pastoral Epistles, the three to Timothy and Titus, in which he teaches the true duties of the bishop and ruler of a church. Then comes the short letter to his friend Philemon about the runaway slave Onesimus. Lastly, we have the Epistle to the Hebrews, not actually written by St. Paul himself, but the work of some disciple of his who was filled with his spirit. It is addressed to Christians who were tempted by persecution to give up their faith. Its great subject is the manner in which the Old Testament prepares for the New, and then makes way for it, pointing out how Christ Himself is the truth of which all earlier forms of religion had only been the shadow. It shows how faith had been the one power which made the weak strong in every age, and how much greater might it should have now for those who believe in the Son of God.

When we pass from St. Paul to St. James, the change is great. It is a striking lesson to us to see how different language both use, because they looked at truth from different sides, and yet how both alike had their work to do for the Church, and served it far more effectually than if one had been the mere copy of the other. Nothing so rebukes our little narrow ways of judging men, and our inclination to cavil at all who do not run in our own groove, as this. Divine breadth of the New Testament and of the Church of the New Testament. St. James, the brother of our Lord according to the flesh, and bishop of Jerusalem, lived and died a Jew almost as much as a Christian. He does not dwell on our Lord's acts or His death or His resurrection; but he cherished

deeply such *words* of our Lord as are preserved in our first three Gospels, and his whole Epistle might be called a sermon on the text, "Not every one that saith unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven."

In St. Peter we have a link between St. Paul and St. James. He is unlike both; yet he echoes the truth of both. The spirit of the whole gospel is in him. He is ever dwelling on the sufferings of Christ on the one side, and the glory of Christ on the other. The second Epistle which bears his name may be taken along with the Epistle of St. Jude. In both there is a strong warning against false teachers of a peculiarly dangerous kind, who, under the pretence of religion, brought in corrupt morals and debased, instead of raising, the characters of those who listened to them.

- St. John's second and third Epistles are short and affectionate greetings and encouragements to two personal friends. His longer Epistle is a most solemn warning from the disciple whom Jesus loved against indifference about sin, against making believe to love God while we hate our brother men, and against letting go our faith in the Son of God's coming in the flesh. The warning to his flock is almost lost in the fulness of the aged apostle's own faith and love. He begins with eternal life, he ends with eternal life; he had found eternal life through his knowledge of Jesus Christ. If we would understand the work of the apostles under the guidance of the Spirit in taking of the

things of Christ, and showing them to us, we cannot do better than begin with listening to his own account of the matter. "The life," he says, "was manifested (or shown to men), and we have seen it, and bear witness and show unto you that eternal life which was with the Father, and was manifested (or shown) unto *us*; that which *we* have seen and heard declare we unto *you*, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you that your joy may be full."

XII

THE APOCALYPSE

"I JESUS have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.—*Revelation* xxii. 16.

WE come to-day to the last book of the New Testament and of the Bible, the Revelation of St. John. It is on the whole the most difficult book in the Bible, and this probably is the reason why so little of it is appointed to be read in church, the epistle for to-day being one of the most striking of the passages which we are thus accustomed to hear. There is good reason to hope that before long its chapters will take their place in our service as second lessons like the chapters of every other book of the New Testament. But meanwhile every one can read it for himself in his own Bible; and the more he reads it, the better will it be for him if he reads it with an open heart and a desire to find in it light from above to lighten the darkness of his own life.

No one who reads in that spirit will find the book

of Revelation unprofitable reading merely because there are hundreds of things there which he does not understand, and can never hope to understand. The power with which it lays bare the world above, and the world beneath, and in a measure the world to come, is not lost for us by any mere want of understanding. Those words near the end of the book, "Let him that is athirst come" may be applied to our treatment of the book. Those who are athirst for the water of life will find the water of life springing bright and clear and plentiful there. Those who have no thirst for the water of life, and only care to amuse themselves with the sound of the words, had better leave the book alone.

The book of Revelation is not only difficult, but difficult for every one. Some of you may have come across books written in the present day which profess to explain it all. I cannot say that I think the explanations are generally worth much; nay, they are, as a rule, not even on the right track, so that there is very little to be learnt from them. But neither do I feel competent to give you in their place anything more than a few hints which may enable you to approach the book in a right spirit. We have hitherto been looking at the books of the Bible chiefly as parts of one great book. That is also the safest way of approaching the Revelation of St. John. We have found the pith of the whole Bible to be God making Himself known to man; and assuredly we shall find the same character in this the last utterance of His written word.

First let us consider the place which the Revelation of St. John holds in the New Testament. You will remember that what marks out the New Testament from the Old is that in it God speaks through His Son. You will remember also that in the first four books of the New Testament—the Gospels—we have the simple, naked message of God conveyed to us by a four-fold picture of the Son Himself, His birth, His life with its ministry of word and deed, His sufferings and death, and His glorious resurrection. *There* nothing comes between us and Him; we are not troubled with doctrines or preachings about Him; we are simply bidden to look on Christ and learn of Him, and believe that in so doing we are learning what it most concerns us to know about the Lord Almighty, since He Himself has said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." You will remember that in the three other groups of books God is still teaching us through His blessed Son, but not through His Son alone; rather through the impression which His Son made upon His faithful followers in that first age. You will remember that Christ's ascension into heaven was followed by His sending of the Holy Ghost, and that the coming of the Holy Ghost was also the foundation of the Church, the body of Christ, the outward and visible bearer of His presence on earth. You will remember that in the Acts of the Apostles we had a picture of the steps by which the Church grew in numbers and width and independence, receiving freely into itself men of all nations, and showing by its acts

and the acts of the apostles who ruled it the true life of men who believe in a crucified and risen Son of God. Lastly, you will remember that in the Epistles we found the express teaching given by the apostles sometimes to the whole Church universal, sometimes to the churches of single places, sometimes to the rulers of churches; sometimes to private Christians. This was the teaching which they gave by letter when they were consulted about difficult matters of doctrine or practice, or when they saw for themselves that warnings or encouragements or instructions were greatly needed. Still we found the same character in a new form. The teaching of the Church of Christ by the apostles of Christ, who were filled with the spirit of Christ, is one of the instruments by which God helps us to understand what Christ was and is, and to apply that understanding to our own use.

We now come to a third way in which the Spirit takes of the things of Christ and shows them to us through the apostles and through the Church; and that is by way of prophecy. We do not hear so much of prophecy in the New Testament as in the Old, but still we do hear of it now and then. Last Sunday we heard how, among the gifts which Christ in that age gave his Church were prophets as well as apostles and evangelists; and there are many signs that the power of prophecy wrought mightily in the daily life of that generation. But we have only one *book* of prophecy, and that is a peculiar one. It contains within itself epistles or letters to seven churches: so far it shows its con-

nexion with the new time, and reminds us that it was meant to serve just as practical purposes as the letters of St. Paul or the other apostles. But the rest of it is made up almost wholly of visions. The teaching is clothed in bodily forms; its motto is "Come and see." In this respect the prophecies of the Old Testament of which it chiefly reminds us are those of Daniel, and then in a less degree of Zechariah and Ezekiel. It is not merely a prophecy, but it belongs to the most prophetic of all kinds of prophecy—it is a revelation, that is, an unveiling. It draws aside the curtains which bound our view in ordinary times. In each direction where our sight is apt to be stopped short a new world is opened before us—the heaven above us, the bottomless pit beneath us, the future end to which all things move. The strife between good and evil, about which we are so miserably indifferent both in our own hearts and in the world around us, is seen to be no light, unimportant matter, since it is part of a mighty warfare in the world of spirits. The lesson of Christ's own life is shown to be repeated in the life of His Church. As He passed through suffering to glory, so must they who bear His name. If the cruel world seems too strong for them now, they are reminded that it seemed too strong for Christ when His soul was poured out on the Cross; and so His return to life and glory is the pledge of what God has prepared for them who are faithful unto death. Every power of evil is seen to be surely doomed at last, and so we are bidden endure always and hope always, for the end is sure.

And again, if the gospel is the setting forth of the image of Christ, then the gospel is the very foundation of the Revelation of St. John. The very first words are "The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave unto him" • the very first vision which opened before the eyes of St. John was of the Son of Man standing in the midst of the seven candlesticks which represent the churches. In the fifth chapter He alone prevails to open the sealed book. In the fourteenth chapter He stands on Mount Zion, with the twelve times twelve thousand who have His Father's name on their foreheads. In the nineteenth chapter He rides forth to judge and make war in righteousness as King of kings and Lord of lords. And in the last chapter He declares, "I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches."

Once more this testimony of Jesus is conveyed through the Spirit and the Church. The seven different churches of Asia at the beginning together stand for the one universal Church. The fortunes of the Church, its seeming death, its deliverance and final glory are the framework of the whole book. And the life which holds the Church together is no other than the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of prophecy, who fills the heart of St. John himself. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" is the warning voice of the Epistles at the beginning. "The Spirit and the bride, *i.e.* the Church, say Come," is the invitation to drink of the water of life which is heard among the last words.

Thus the Revelation of St. John winds up the

whole New Testament. But it does much more than this: it winds up the whole Bible, and in so doing makes us feel that the Bible is indeed not only many books but also one book, carrying out one purpose and plan from first to last. To begin with, the language is throughout for the most part borrowed from the Old Testament and especially from the books of the prophets. We cannot read a chapter carefully without seeing how St. John's mind was filled with the words spoken by the men of old time, and how he used their lessons along with his own knowledge of Jesus Christ to explain to himself the ways of God in the events which were happening around him. And so it comes to pass that the attentive study of the Old Testament is to us one most useful help towards the understanding of the book of Revelation. If we wish to grasp the meaning of the pictures and images which crowd upon our sight as we read, the first step should be to try whether we cannot trace them back to some form which rose before the eyes of the early prophets of Israel.

But again the book of Revelation keeps us constantly in the presence of the Jews, and compels us to remember that God's covenant with His own original people is the foundation of all His plans of salvation for mankind. The holy Jewish numbers 7 and 12 run through the book and perpetually recall our thoughts to the Sabbath of God and the tribes of the people of God. Nay, the servants of God who are sealed upon their foreheads before the plagues are let loose upon the earth, are sealed by

tribes, twelve thousand to each by name. Nay in the last great vision the names of the same twelve tribes are written on the gates of the new Jerusalem; and the foundations of the wall of the city have in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, the link between the Old time and the New, the friends and followers of the crucified King of the Jews, who became also bearers of the gospel to all peoples and tongues. Nay, when Jesus speaks in His own name in the concluding verses, He calls Himself the root and the offspring of David, delighting to link His name with that of the shepherd king who had first by his righteous government moulded the children of Israel into one people.

Once more the Revelation of St. John goes back to the very beginnings of the Old Testament beyond the limits of the Jews. The paradise or garden of God appears once more, and in the midst of the new Jerusalem the tree of life is seen growing. Christ who describes Himself as the beginning and ending, the first and the last, suffers nothing to perish, but carries on all things to perfection. He does not lead men back simply to their early childhood; He guides them ever onwards, and encourages every stage of their growth to full stature; but He does not cast away the fresh charm of early innocence; He brings it back ripened and ennobled in the Heavenly Father's kingdom.

I have spoken now of the place which the book of Revelation holds in the New Testament, and the place which it holds in the whole Bible. It remains to say a few words on its own character as a single

book and the purpose with which it would seem to have been written. We are told in the ninth verse of the first chapter that John was a companion in tribulation with the seven churches of Asia, and that the visions which he wrote down for their instruction had been seen by him as he was in the isle called Patmos, for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. The meaning of this is that, at a time when the churches were suffering persecution for the name of Christ, he too was suffering the same, and had been banished away from home into a little island in the midst of the sea. Twice in the lifetime of St. John great persecutions are known to have occurred, and either of these may have given rise to his book. On the whole however, I believe that various marks throughout the book point to the first of these two persecutions as the true time.

And a terrible time it was. The greater part of the civilized world was then subject to the emperor or king of Rome, and the emperor of Rome was Nero, a young man who, after a promising beginning, had become such a monster of wickedness as struck men with horror in the midst of an unusually wicked time. It happened that the city of Rome was on fire, and burned for six days. It was commonly believed at the time that Nero had set it on fire for his own amusement. Whether this was true or not, he began to fear danger to himself from the common belief, and therefore turned the fury against the Christians, instead of himself by declaring that it was they who had done it. He put forth all his skill to invent cruel ways of punishment. Some of the

wretched Christians were wrapped in the skins of wild beasts, and then bitten to death by dogs. Others were crucified. Others were sewn up in cloths dipped in pitch, tied to stakes, and set on fire. Either in this persecution, or in one which followed a few months later, St. Peter and St. Paul were themselves murdered. The rage of the heathen against the Christians seems to have broken out in many places, and a cruel death was the lot of many who were not ashamed to confess that they believed in Christ. The crimes of Nero, not against the Christians, but against his own people, at last woke up a rebellion, and he died by his own hand. His death happened exactly eighteen hundred years ago within a day or two. Then came a time of great confusion and bloodshed, no less than three emperors being killed within a year and a half. Meanwhile new dangers had arisen for the Christians. The Jews had rebelled against their Roman masters, and a fierce war had sprung up. The Jews hated the Christians as bitterly as when they had striven to murder St. Paul at Jerusalem; the Romans who had then protected him were now turned against his disciples with equal fury. The whole world was combined against the little flock who believed that Jesus was Lord: it seemed as if they must be rooted off the face of the earth.

That, brethren, was the time when the Revelation of St. John was written. If you wish to understand those marvellous visions, try to carry back your minds to those days of anguish and blood, when to do as we are doing to-day, to meet publicly for the

worship of God as Christians, would have been likely to bring upon us torture and death to-morrow, and, when every neighbouring land was given up to violence and every kind of wickedness. Then you may a little understand how the burning words came from St. John's heart. But observe what was the tone of his prophecy. He saw no immediate prospect of a better order of things. Nay, each successive chapter seems to carry us deeper into a vision of judgment. Many in that day believed that the monster Nero, who called forth a kind of admiration by the very greatness of his crimes, would before long come back to life and trample upon all his enemies. And there are signs that St. John himself looked for some such fresh outburst of yet more devilish wickedness, the most complete opposite of the holy Jesus. Yet he never wavers in his faith. He believes that all power is given—to whom? to Him whose name is the Lamb, the gentlest and most helpless of creatures, nay, to the Lamb that was slain. The darkness that encompassed the earth only cleared his eyesight to behold the heavenly light. In the miseries and disorders around him he saw the beginnings of Christ's judgment upon a wicked world, and beyond the clouds he had a vision of the holy city of peace. Many a generation has passed away since that day: but the great decision for life or for death remains the same for us as it did for his trembling disciples. Let us be thankful that we are permitted in these quiet times to look with his eyes upon the awful forms which stand around our little life, and to learn from his example what power the faith in

Christ crucified and risen can give to defy every assault of the enemy.

It seems a change from great things to small when we pass from the wondrous visions of St. John to the doings of a single English society, such as that for which I have to speak to you to-day. But all those grand visions will do us no good if they leave us indifferent to the duties which lie before ourselves as English Christians at the present time. We have all work enough to do in striving by God's grace to train our own hearts into the love and fear of His name. But indifference to the spiritual wants of others is a sure mark that the life within ourselves is feeble and cold. It is our blessing here that for several hundreds of years the house of God has stood among us, ever reminding us whose name we bear, and inviting us to worship together in that name. But there are many other places less happy, places where every year more and more people are crowded together with no church to help them forward on the upward road. The Church Building Society is willing to give help to the best of its power to either the building or the improvement of churches in all kinds of places. For instance, it gave a liberal grant to our own church when it was repaired some time ago, and the number of sittings increased: and for this we owe it a debt of gratitude which I hope will swell our offerings to-day. But the main work of the society is in places poorer and more crowded than this; and I do earnestly trust that we shall show our sense of God's goodness to us by the help which we give to His worship where it is sorely needed.

For fifty years the society has been at work, and now the need is greater than ever, for men are born into the world faster than churches can be built. The claim is always strong: it comes with special force this year, which ought to be marked by unusual efforts, so that the society may start afresh on its second half-century with greatly increased powers. Believe me, brethren, we do ourselves grievous injury by coolness and niggardliness when appeals of this kind come round. By giving freely, according as we can spare, for the sake of Christ and His Church, we enlarge our own hearts, we join ourselves in fresh bonds to our brethren, we bring the kingdom of God nearer to us.

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